

# When Will Customers Claim Their Rights as Empowered And Creative Human Beings?

## - a rhetorical perspective on co-creation

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### Abstract

Designers as well as business leaders are strictly focusing on co-creation and co-creation activities as an effective method to innovation in business and product development. Paradoxically we seem to forget the perspective of the customers.

The intention of this paper is to bring a rhetorical approach to 'co-creation'. This approach emphasizes co-creation as a specific form of rhetorical design discourse directed at customers who are introduced to new creative ways of expressing themselves. The rhetorical perspective also emphasizes how this discourse is capable of constituting its audience in new roles, here as empowered, active and creative people. This co-creation discourse is considered an art 'constitutive rhetoric' (Charland, 1987). The crucial effect of the constitutive rhetoric is the audience claiming its right on behalf of this constitution. This raises the question: when will customers claim their rights on behalf of these new roles - as creative human beings - and how can we possibly develop co-creation and reply to this possible demand?

In co-creation sessions designers are appealing to the customers's creativity by presenting generative tools in order to make the customers express their creativity, their tacit knowledge, their dreams and needs. The paper agrees with Sanders that these generative tools entail the possibility of growing into a new language not restricted to co-creation sessions and organizational development (Sanders, 2002). Using the generative tools is a way of inviting design thinking and creativity into everyday peoples lives, offering them a way of reflecting and responding as creative human beings. Rhetorically this means offering the capacity to act also called 'rhetorical agency' (Hoff-Clausen et al., 2005) and as such a possible solution to customers claiming their rights as creative human beings.

The paper will outline different understandings of co-creation as well as bring experiences from co-creation activities conducted in a present research in a Danish bank. The paper will also bring an example of customers claiming their rights.

### Keywords

co-creation; constitutive rhetoric; agency; generative tools; creativity.

### Different perspectives on co-creation

The popular business researcher Richard Normann claims we are moving towards a veritable revolution where value creation will be the core activity of the organisation and customers will act as co-producers, co-creating values. Normann claims organisations to be value creating systems and co-creation to be a practical tool for involving the customers both in the value chain as a whole and in the business system of the company (Normann, 2001). According to Normann we are leaving an industrial strategic paradigm and moving into this new paradigm with focus on value creation. The industrial paradigm was about producing goods and services to be 'pushed' into a market, where consumers were acting as passive receivers of the goods. In recent years companies have moved into a kind of in between state where the central concern is about

'relations' as seen in service and service management. Central here is customer relation management as customers are regarded as a source for information, ideas, needs etc. According to Norman we are now facing what he calls 'the real revolution' – the absolute opposite to the industrial paradigm – where the customer is regarded as co-producer involved in the creation of value.

In this move user centred innovation has been the dominant paradigm of the past decade and 'users' and 'co-creators' have been popular terms both in the field of design and the field of business. Unfortunately different and confusing understandings of co-creation are ruling. Here a crucial difference is whether you regard the user as 'a subject' or as 'a partner'. In von Hippel's notion about 'the lead user' and in Prahalad & Ramaswamy's idea about co-creation the user as 'a subject'-perspective is present (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The fact that designers regard 'customers' or even human beings as 'partners' is a crucial matter and a very important reason why designers are having their heydays in relation to user studies. As Verganti claims designers are having an amazing capacity to get close to users and understand their needs (Verganti, 2009). An essential reason for this is that designers do not 'fixate' human beings into specific roles as 'customers', but consider human beings as co-creating partners. In that sense designers are releasing themselves from a very limiting organisational perspective and presenting a more holistic view on organisations and human beings – in fact the picture of organisations that Norman is sketching. Unfortunately designers are often employed by business leaders and as the business leaders tend to have the 'user as a subject'-perspective, this is the dominant perspective in business and the reason why co-creation activities often are limited into 'user inputs' rather than real co-creation activities in organisations. In this way designers seem to hold the key to real co-creation activities and to the reframing of organisations (Normann, 2001).

## **Locked in an organizational perspective**

The tendency that business leaders seem to overlook the fact that 'co-creation' means 'creating together' rather than getting inspired and getting ideas from users leaves both designers as well as customers in a locked position. Sanders who have developed 'Make Tools' as a new type of language already claims: "*Design is serving markets, not people. Design is serving the needs of companies, not people*" (Sanders, 2006, p.28). This article goes beyond Sander's view in offering a rhetorical perspective that brings new insight to co-creation. The article focuses on how co-creation activities constitute customers as 'experts', 'creative human beings' or 'co-creators' and how these 'new' experts and co-creators often end up in the business organisation reduced to 'user inputs'. This raises the question: what effect does such a discourse have on the audience? Applying a rhetorical perspective on co-creation brings useful insights for designers when understanding and developing co-creation. First of all I will outline the nature of co-creation activities and techniques, among these also the activities used in a current research in the Danish bank, Middelfart Sparekasse.

## **Co-creation activities and techniques**

In the field of co-creation designers and design researchers are developing an increasing amount of tools and methods for co-creating activities. (Gaver, Dunne, Pacenti, Mättelmaki, Sanders, Stappers, Visser et al). Some serve as cognitive tools that 'leave room' for the participants to express their creativity, their dreams, needs and tacit knowledge. Due to completed experiments in my current research in the bank, Middelfart Sparekasse I consider these methods powerful as the participants explain they achieve higher awareness about emotions and relation to certain issues.

When designing material for creative sessions Sanders suggests a converging perspectives approach that combines different methods, tools and artifacts that furthermore combine what people 'say', 'do' and 'make' (Sanders, 2001). A combination of approaches from marketing research ('*what people say*'), anthropology ('*what people do*') and participatory design ('*what*

*people make*’) is applied. Following the converging perspective, the participants were interviewed, asked to do things and asked to make their own expressions. Central to this way of ‘asking’ is the idea that the designer leads the participants through a ‘guided discovery’ appealing to their creativity and inner feelings and hereby sets a stage for them to express their thoughts and ideas.

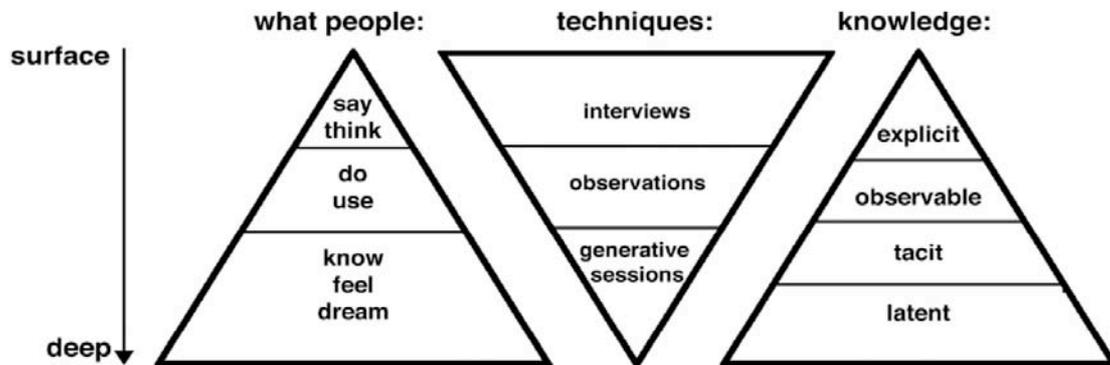


Fig. 1. Different levels of knowledge are accessed by different methods. (Sleeswijk Visser et al., 2005)

Talking with people by, e.g. interviewing them, provides information about what people can say, which is mainly explicit knowledge. Observation studies give insight into the physical context of people and how people do things. Generative techniques use the creativity of people to become aware and express their own experiences. Creative tools or self documentation techniques (Gaver et al., 1999; Mattelmäki, 2006) help people reflect on their memories, feelings, motivations, create awareness about their experiences, help them express themselves in a visual form, and help them use these representations as a basis for talking about the experiences (Stappers and Sanders, 2003).

Central in the field of generative design research are the ‘generative tools’, the thinking tools non-designers can use to express their inner dreams (or fears) for the future. Generative design makes us see how things *could be* and empowers everyday people to generate and promote alternatives to the current situation. In this field you find researchers such as Sanders, Stappers, Visser et al. A central concept in the field of critical design is ‘probes’. Cultural Probes originate from Gaver et al. (1999), who designed them to provoke inspirational responses from elderly people in diverse communities. Originally probes are packages containing maps, postcards, a camera and a diary. These packages are sent to the private homes of the participants, who respond to them and return them to the designer. Probes are primarily used in places or circumstances too private for researchers to show up in person. Their aim is to “*make the participants think*”, to “*provoke existing values*” and aim at “*generating and promoting alternatives to the current situation*” (Sanders, 2006, p.1).

In the present research project approximately 4 different types of creative sessions have been conducted with all in all 21 participants. The intention of the creative sessions was to meet human beings and to let them reflect and express their relation to money, private economy, banks, financial advisors etc.

## Experiences from the creative sessions

When designing artifacts for the different co-creation session at the bank, I designed a box (Fig. 2). The intention was to make a private 'room' for the individual to respond in, but still having the possibility to observe and start plenary discussions. I have completed different co-creation sessions (a total of 22 persons). In one of the experiments, the participants were invited into the same room, and each received a box filled with material and tasks. I designed the box as a private 'room', leaving space for reflection, memories and ideas when responding to the questions, the provocative statements and the creative tasks. This 'reflective room' was designed with a happy artificial long green grass carpet in the bottom, topped by the material: pictures, pieces of paper, scissor, glue, coloured pencils. The box had an appealing and accommodating look, almost like a gift with long green ribbons attached to small notes, telling people what to do.

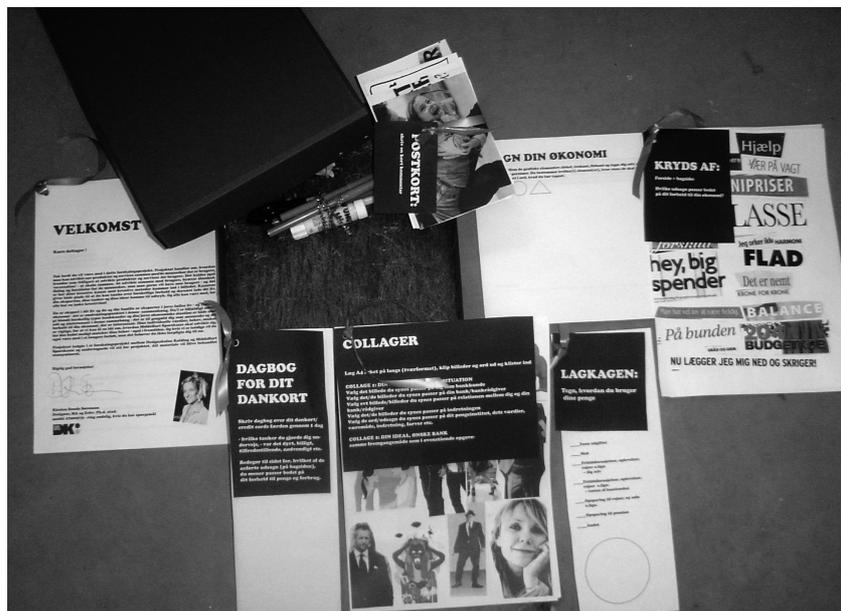


Fig.2: Illustrating the box containing different creative tasks, pictures, pencils etc.

The workshop started out in the easy 'making' level of the creative tasks and ended up in the 'creating' level. As per Sanders (2008) there are four levels of everyday creativity, ranging from 'doing' to 'adapting', to 'making' to 'creating'. Where 'doing' represents an ordinary productive activity, 'adapting' means to make something one's own by changing it in some way. The motivation behind the third level of creativity, 'making', is to use one's hands and mind to make or build something that did not exist before. And finally the most advanced level of creativity is the fourth level, 'creating'. The motivation for 'creating' is to express oneself or to innovate and these types of real creative efforts are both guided by a high level of experience and executed with passion, Sanders claims.

At the 'making' level, the participants were asked to make comments to statements printed on postcards, asked to underline the preferred sentences, for example describing their relationship to their private economy. At the end, at the 'creating' level they were asked to make a collage (Fig. 3A) illustrating their current relationship to their economy by adding: 1) a picture illustrating themselves as customers, 2) a picture illustrating their bank/financial advisor, 3) a picture depicting the relationship between the two, 4) a picture illustrating the surroundings and 5) words underscoring the chosen pictures, all in their own words. Afterwards they were asked to make a new collage, (Fig.3B) in a similar way, but illustrating an ideal future situation. Finally they were asked how to get from Collage A to Collage B. These collages and answers were primarily used

as material for analysis, as they were 'the final creations' presumably incorporating all the reflections. An important point is that the participants were asked to present their collages in front of a camera and these verbal presentations formed the primary material for analysis supported by the visual expressions.

## Co-creation as constitutive rhetoric

From a rhetorical perspective co-creation can be considered an art 'constitutive rhetoric'. In the field of co-design researchers have introduced the importance of seeing and regarding the customer as 'empowered', 'creative', 'co-creators' and 'human beings'. Approaching the customer, it is crucial the participants (customers) feel 'empowered' and as 'experts'. Researchers from the field of co-creation are underlining this by purposing to give badges to the customer saying: "*I am an expert in my life*". Having completed several co-creation sessions in a bank (with approximately 20 participants), this manoeuvre is quite powerful and the participants actually do feel empowered and experts.

Charland's notion about constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987) implies the idea of rhetoric that 'constitutes' the audience in a double way: It constitutes the audience in a specific subject position (here customers being creative and experts in their lives) but in the same time, Charland claims, this audience will claim its rights on behalf of this constitution, this 'new' subject position. Charland's notion about 'constitutive rhetoric' is presented in his article: "The Case of the People Québécois" (Charland, 1987). In Charland's study of the "People Québécois" he shows how advocates for Quebec's political sovereignty "*addressed and so attempted to call into being a people quebecois that would legitimate the constitution of a sovereign Quebec state*" (Charland, 1987, p. 134). A key term in rhetoric is 'persuasion' which implies the existence of an audience free to be persuaded.

In Charland's study of the nationalistic movement in Quebec he argued that certain forms of discursive practice function as constitutive rhetoric. Charland claims constitutive rhetoric does more than create an image of its audience, it generates the conditions of possibility that can structure the identity of those to whom it is addressed - analogues to Althusser's notion 'interpellation', Charland claims. Interpellation occurs at the very moment one enters into a rhetorical situation, that is, as soon as an individual recognizes and acknowledge being addressed. Althusser uses the example about an individual walking down the street. He is challenged by a policeman calling: "Hey you!" and the individual reacts by turning around. By turning around he acknowledges the call was pointed exactly at him. In this simple bodily movement, by turning around, he gets transformed into a subject.

In Charland's study he concluded that "*it is up to the Québécois of 1980 to conclude the story to which they are identified*" and into which they have been interpellated. In Charland's study he emphasizes the way narratives function: "*In other words while classical narratives have an ending, constitutive rhetorics leave the task of narrative closure to their constituted subjects. It is up to the Québécois of 1980 to conclude the story to which they are identified*" (Charland, 1987, p.143). Charland claims constitutive rhetoric to be an ubiquitous force that shapes the identity of its addressees. In the 'act of addressing' auditors, an advocate's message awakens or energizes certain possibilities or a specific identity or subject position for that audience. In certain cases, Charland noted, this process is akin more to one of conversation as audiences come to inhabit a "*reconfigured subject position*" (Charland, 1987, p.142). An example to illustrate this is: "*In a television commercial for toothpaste, managers not only to sell its product but also to energize certain identity possibilities as it positions its audience in the role of 'consumers'. We become consumers or we are (re)positioned in the role as consumers, as we are addressed by the commercial*", Jasinski claims (Jasinski, 2001, p.107).

Charland's conception of constitutive rhetoric was developed to illuminate the workings of political discourse, yet it provides a framework to understand how audiences are rhetorically constructed by advertising texts. Charland builds on Kenneth Burke's proposal in "A rhetoric of

motives" (1969) to use 'identification' rather than 'persuasion' as the key term of the rhetorical processes.

## **Nike – a case**

Maybe we have already seen the first examples of interpellated and empowered customers claiming their rights in the following NIKE co-design case: On the internet, at NIKEiD it was possible to design your own shoes. Although customers are not explicitly constituted in new subject positions, NIKE implicitly addresses the audience as creative human beings with *"the freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are"*. (<http://shey.net/niked.html> ). A customer, Jonah Peretti ordered a pair of shoes with his personal ID: "sweatshop". NIKE rejected his order claiming "sweatshop" to be "inappropriate slang". Peretti referred to Websters dictionary saying "sweatshop" is standard English with the meaning: *"a shop or factory in which workers are employed for long hours at low wages and under unhealthy conditions"*. Peretti continues in his mail to NIKE: *"I was thrilled to be able to build my own shoes and my personal ID was offered as a small token of appreciation for the sweatshop workers poised to help me realize my vision. I hope that you will value my freedom of expression and reconsider your decision to reject my order."* Peretti never had his shoes, but had to change his ID. The mail thread was sent to some friends, now it is available to everybody on the Internet, a menace to the brand and especially to their image as they were not capable of delivering what they promised.

This is an example of implicitly constituting customers with 'the freedom to choose and the freedom to express who you are' and customers claiming their right on behalf of this constitution. This also is an example on how companies are using the right words in order to appeal to the new customer, but unfortunately they have not realized the effect of the discourse.

In a broader perspective the NIKE example is only a small part of a present and immense promotional discourse including co-creation- and user-driven discourses. The case also illustrates how NIKE *apparently* offers huge 'freedom to express yourself'.

## **Co-creation - with or without rhetorical agency**

In co-creation and co-design (a subnotion of co-creation) the very notion includes the idea about equality and freedom to create, design and act. In rhetoric the notion, rhetorical 'agency' stands for the capacity to act rhetorically. On one hand the notion refers to the instrumental aspects of rhetoric like rhetor's use of resources in order to reach a goal. As such agency can be translated into rhetor's capacity to act in relation to his talents and strategies. On the other hand the notion refers to both the circumstances in which rhetor constitutes him self and the circumstances rhetor is constituted by. Generally agency is focusing on the constellation of individual and structural elements and how the interaction between the speaker and the situation is of relevance to the rhetorical construction of meaning and influence. In a rhetorical analysis or discussion the chosen focus on aspects in a specific constellation will reveal the use and understanding of 'agency'. (Hoff-Clausen, Isager & Villadsen, 2005).

To elaborate on the notion 'agency', Hoff-Clausen et all. give an very illustrative example of a human being with an ethos based on the idea about rhetorical agency: Günther Wallraff, a German author and critic was hired as a reporter on the tabloid magazine 'Bild Zeitung' under false name. During 3 months he worked under the editorial principles he intended to bring into light and his following accounts of misrepresentations and fabrications, extortions, tappings and housebreakings caused a sensation all over the world. Hoff-Clausen et all. claim this to be an example of a citizen who responds intentionally to a discrepancy in the public space, as he uses his rhetorical competences in order to accomplish a rhetorical strategy that establish his personal drive and striking power and moreover gets an effect on the discrepancy in question. In the example 'agency' is illustrated in Walraff's use of his capacity to act - his talents and strategies, but Hoff-Clausen et all. also claim that in this rhetorical scenario the persons who are 'borrowing

Wallraff's voice', the persons who are being giving rhetorical agency, are the victims of the journalism and colleagues at Bild Zeitung.

Going back to the Nike case, the company actually acts and communicates as if they were offering rhetorical agency for the customers by offering them "the freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are". Peretti acts on behalf of this rhetorical constitution and agency and illustrates thereby that there actually is only very little and very limited agency.

This raises the questions in relation to co-creation activities: what kind of agency are these companies offering? Through co-creation activities customers and users as constituted as 'co'creators', 'creative human beings' etc. but what kind of reactions do they actually tolerate?

According to Buchanan's mapping of design and designers, the Nike example also illustrates both the development but also the power within design. In Buchanan's mapping (2001) design and designers are mapped within four orders: In the first and second order focus on 'symbols and images' and later on 'things' and gave rise to graphic design and industrial design. In the third order changed its focus to 'action' and gave rise to interaction design. The fourth order is related to action, but focuses on the 'environment and systems' within which action takes place. This is the area of 'thought', since it is fundamentally concerned with the organising idea of principles that operate behind environment and systems, i.e. human systems. Designers in this order can be seen as facilitators of organizational processes. "They organise conversations and debates about the values of a community and how those values may be implemented with productive results" (Buchanan, 2001). In this Nike example it gets very clear how the NIKE company considers the 'ID-shop' as a matter within the first order of design, but the design discourse, the very co-design discourse affects the customers, so Peretti 'answers' from the fourth order of design, this co-design thing is not only a matter of designing your own cute logo, it is also about 'the freedom to express who you are'. Rhetorically Peretti answers from the 'offered' rhetorical agency. This leads to the question: *If rhetorical agency is the act of effecting change through discourse, how can we develop co-creation activities to include rhetorical agency?*

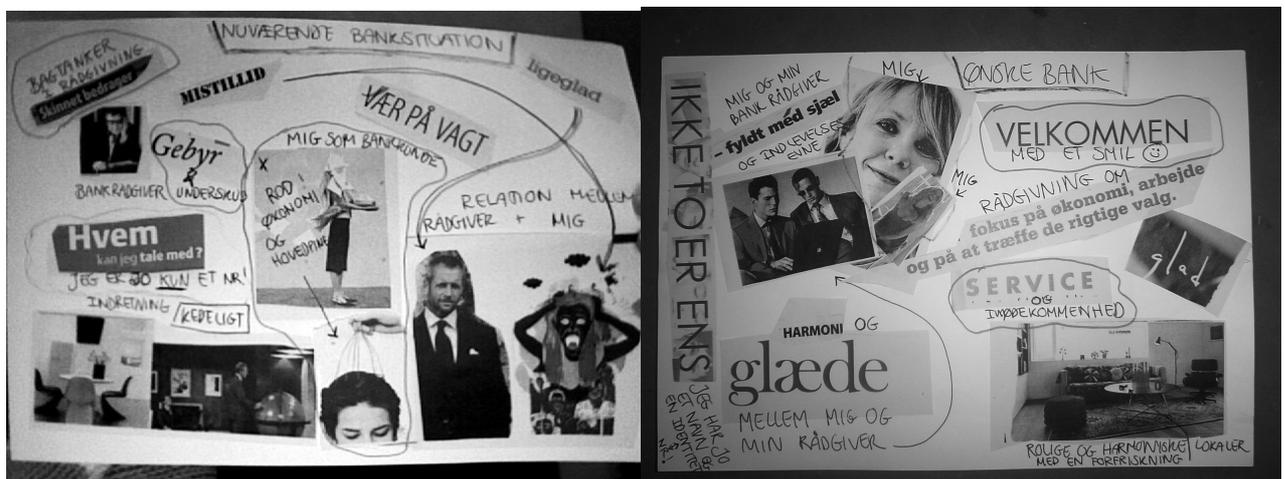


Fig. 3 A+B: Collage A illustrating the present situation, and collage B illustrating the future situation.

### Changing the focus in the co-creation sessions

A look back to the completed creative sessions and the reflections of the participants, they rather precisely outline the nature of the generative tools and equal to Sanders description. The different levels of creativity, the guided discovery that appealed to the participants inner feelings and tacit

knowledge is for example described by one of the participant, Anne Marie: *"...performing the tasks in the box was one long process, where I got deeper and deeper into the concept of 'economy': first filling out the postcards, choosing statements and so on. I think these tasks were necessary in order to make the final collages. In these collages I felt I was able to express my reflections and final statement; my frustration about my personal finances got released. Actually I was surprised I got so emotional upset, now I am more aware that I must do something about my economy."*

The process performing the creative tasks made her reflect, and finally she claims she ends up being more aware of her specific needs and wishes. When she explains her wishes for the future bank she expresses that she wants to get in control of her economy and how this is supposed to be done.

Another participant claims in the interview before doing the creative session that she is quite satisfied with her bank and her financial advisor, but having done the creative session she tells she actually is quite irritated on her financial advisor as he has a certain way of talking to her and accusing her for having only 'a small arrangement' in the bank. This example illustrates that also smaller issues can be revealed during the creative sessions using the generative tools.

This creative session resulted in a lot of information about financial customers in general (here 21 persons) and their thoughts about the bank – and *this* is the focus of the traditional co-creation sessions and research. To me there are plenty of new and much more interesting perspectives: the fact that this guided discovery is having a personal effect on several of the participants like Anne Marie is triggering my creativity and interest in developing these tools. The facts that the use of generative tools actually is letting people get more aware of their financial situation and sometimes make them want to act and change their situation, is triggering my creativity and interest in developing these tools into a new type of banking service.

## **Future perspectives**

Business leaders still consider co-creation a new and interesting way of getting information and ideas from the customers. Designers are having their heydays as they are very good at getting close to users, understand their needs and generate ideas (Verganti, 2009). This leads to new challenges, because executives now think about design and designers in two perspectives: the first – and the very traditional one – is styling. Designers are asked to make products look nice and beautiful (Buchanans 1.order of design, 2001). The second – and more recent perspective – is user-centred design. And as Verganti stresses, first the styling and then the user-centred design have been portrayed as vehicles by which companies differentiate themselves from the competition. Many analysts claim design in these ways make the difference (Verganti, 2009) and no company would dare release a product without caring about style and analyzing user needs and as such design is in its heyday. But what are the visions in the field of design?

Looking deeper into the co-creation activities and especially the generative tools, there seems to be plenty of possibilities if these are developed and not only limited to 'user studies'. Using the generative tools in co-creation sessions is also a way of introducing creativity and creative thinking to non-designers.

In the current research these generative tools are being developed into a new type of service offered for people in order to become more aware about personal values, needs and dreams. The service presumably will be offered for customers in the bank but there will be no expectations except for the customers to become more aware of their values in life, including their economy. As such customers are treated as creative human beings and offered the agency to act - to feel free to go to another bank or stay in Middelfart Sparekasse. As such the service will become a radical new way of doing consumer communication, based on customer awareness rather than persuasion.

## Conclusion

Normann (2001) claims we are moving towards a veritable revolution with organisations as value creating systems. Maybe we *are* moving towards a veritable revolution, but until now co-creation mainly is conducted within the dominant organisational perspective and that is the reason why co-creation has primarily been operating on the outer edges of companies's value chains. As a result of this the paper claims customers are being left in a gap. The claim is underpinned by applying a rhetorical perspective that sheds new light on the communicative consequences, how these co-creation and co-design discourses affect the audience. The notions, 'constitutive rhetoric' (Charland, 1987) and 'rhetorical agency' (Hoff-Clausen et al. 2005) illustrates how the popular user-participation and co-creation discourses actually constitute customers in new subject positions, as 'creative human beings', 'co-creators' and 'co-designers' 'with the freedom to act' and 'to express who you are' ect. The example from NIKE precisely illustrates how customers are constituted as creative human beings and with the capacity to act, but here the customer, Peretti makes visible how this rhetorical agency is only an illusion – in reality the case showed is only offering very limited agency. Unfortunately companies have not understood the effect of these discourses and here the Nike example also proofs customers have already started 'claiming their rights' on behalf of this constitution (Charland,1987) here as empowered co-creators and creative human beings.

Considering co-creation an art design discourse is a way of regarding design and creativity as a 'new language'. The paper brings examples from a current research in a Danish bank, Middelfart Sparekasse. Here co-creation sessions resulted in different, but no radical information or ideas from the users, whereas the very meeting with the generative tools gave inspiration to the designer and researcher to develop a new and total different type of service. The idea is to transform the generative tools in a new service as they work as tools for reflection and can create more awareness about values in life, dreams and needs – a rather central issue in private economy. The service will presumably be offered in the bank in the future and without any expectations. On the contrary, the bank will let the customers feel free to change bank or stay. As such banking service is changing its meaning (Verganti, 2009) from an issue about money and economy to include a service that offers reflection and greater awareness about underlying and sometimes unconscious presumptions and essential values in life. As such the new service also will become a total new way of doing customer and company communication based on increased awareness instead of persuasion.

Transforming the generative tools into a new service is only one way of inviting design thinking and creativity into everyday peoples lives, offering them a way of reflecting and responding as creative human beings. Rhetorically this means both constituting people as creative human beings and in the same time offering them the capacity to act also called 'rhetorical agency' (Hoff-Clausen et al., 2005). The example is just one of presumable many solutions to customers claiming their rights as creative human beings.

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A graphic designer from the Kolding School of Design, Denmark and Utrecht School of the Arts, Holland she also holds a MA in rhetoric (MARC) from Aarhus University, Denmark. She is currently working on an Industrial PhD project funded by the Danish savings bank Middelfart Sparekasse and attached to Kolding School of Design. Her research is within the field of strategic design and investigates how design and design thinking can contribute to business development and innovation.