



How to Know Whether Your Brand Needs Help

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Brands are just like any asset deployed over an extended period of time. Every so often, they need to be tuned up to ensure continued optimal productivity. Yet, with the exception of traumatic events – like a steep drop in sales or discontinuation by a major retailer – brands typically don't cry out for attention. So how do you know whether your brand needs help?

Brands most often need help in one of two ways. There are problems with *brand expression*: either they're not communicating effectively, or they're not delivering the experience that customers expect. Most often, however, we see problems with *brand strategy*.

How effective is your brand expression?

Since a brand's image exists only in the mind of its beholders, it is essential to understand beholders' perceptions. Brand health assessments often begin with such inquiry, and the most useful contain feedback on all variety of expressions that contribute to brand image: formal and informal communications, direct and indirect experiences with the company, and most of all, the product or service, itself.

Let's say you discover that your brand's target audience has negative impressions of your brand. That's bad news, but great feedback: it is clear that this brand needs help with how it is being expressed. But what if your target audience has perceptions like "best price," "most innovative," "hardest working," or "most trustworthy"? Objectively, this feedback sounds positive, and many marketers would walk away satisfied. In truth, however, we can't know whether these brand perceptions are positive or negative because the "barometer" is missing.

This barometer is your brand strategy. If you intended to convey "best price" because you've determined that this is how your brand will win in the market place, then you can be elated with the customer feedback above. If, however, you intended to convey a different message, your brand is in need of help. The punch line is this: A brand is expressed well if, *and only if*, what it is expressing is on strategy. And this holds for all expressions of the brand: both the communications (what you say) and the delivery of the brand experience (what you do).



Do you have the right brand positioning strategy?

The actual brand positioning is a concise statement of what you promise to deliver that will lead your brand to triumph over competitors. Once established, the positioning statement drives all expressions of the brand. If you have the brand strategy right, then you're seeing positive results in the market place. Your brand is winning competitive battles, attracting new customers, sustaining price increases, and gaining distribution. If these growth markers are lacking, then your strategy needs adjustment. Did you select the right target audience? Is the promise compelling to your target audience? Is this promise unique in the market place? Usually, getting the positioning statement right requires target audience research, competitor analysis, and sharp strategic insight.

Brand assessment framework

To recap, brand strategy is the barometer for any and all expressions of the brand, be they ads or actual experiences with the product. Here is a framework for evaluating brand health status.

I. Do I have the right positioning?

A. What is the current positioning? Often, company materials unintentionally express a variety of similar, but inconsistent brand promises. This often occurs because no formal statement of brand positioning exists. If there is no single, concise positioning statement, then your target audience may be hearing *too many* messages to have a *coherent* perception of your brand. If this is the case, your brand needs help.

B. Is the current positioning unique versus competitors? Once the appropriate competitive set has been established, it makes sense to review each competitor's marketing materials to infer brand positioning. Since these often evolve, and new players enter the market, it is not farfetched that your once unique positioning is no longer so.

C. Is the promise of my brand truly motivating to the target audience? Finding a compelling benefit that motivates the target is often the hardest work there is. The truth is, if you



haven't got this right, your brand will fail. So validating possible brand promises with the target audience is essential to either confirming your current course or re-charting.

II. Is my intended positioning being accurately perceived by my target audience?

A. What are my audience's perceptions about my brand? Getting a read on your target audience's perceptions of your brand is critical. Again, the key is to assess whether they perceive your brand *as you intend them to*.

B. Where is my expression of the brand positioning falling short? As we know, brands are expressed in many different ways, which can be grouped as follows: 1) things you say, 2) things you do, 3) things *others* say and do.

1. Things you say. Brand managers must monitor all materials developed to express your brand, such as the advertising, tag line, collateral, press releases, websites, and recruiting materials. You have to check: when the brand's promise is expressed, both in writing and visually, is it expressed consistent with the positioning? If not, your brand needs help.

2. Things you do. Every customer touch point must deliver on the brand promise, be it a sales call, a customer service interaction, or the product or service, itself. Many times, audits of what customers actually experience reveal that promises are not being kept. If this is so, your brand needs help.

3 and 4. Things others say and do. What might happen beyond your control that could shed a negative light on your brand? An adverse incident? A negative new product review? Depending on the level of damage inflicted, this could result in your brand needing help.

Occasionally brands tell you themselves that they need help. Lacking this feedback, you're the one who has to inquire. The relevant question is not: "Is my brand well-perceived?" Rather, the relevant questions are: "Are perceptions of my brand consistent of what I'm intending to express about my brand?" *and* "Have I properly set my brand strategy?"