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Why knowing
what's said
about your
brand behind
your back is
so critical to
your success.

Your brand is what they say it is.

“You don’t see the world as it is. You see the world as you are.”

Anais Nin, Writer

Companies have a variety of reasons to consider rebranding. Often it’s triggered by an acquisition or a change in leadership but other times it’s simply realizing that your brand has been put on autopilot for far too long. While the reason why leaders choose to invest in a rebrand is a critical component, it’s also necessary to be honest and open to what the rebranding process really entails.

The reality is, leaders, marketing teams and even frontline employees are so deep inside the bottle, it’s virtually impossible to read the label. This is a direct reflection of the quote above—when you’re so close to something and believe in it so strongly, it’s nearly impossible to decipher reality from your own perception. This is the exact reason branding experts exist. It’s our job to help you see the truths (good and bad) about your brand.

Knowing what people say about your brand when you’re not in the room is the only way to identify the most powerful opportunities that can align with your business objectives and position you for the best possible outcome.

While a brand audit includes several elements, it’s important to take a close look at how and what data is gathered from actual people – including those who know you well and those who may not be aware of your brand at all.

Why it's important to engage an expert.

We understand branding and its role in your businesses, which helps us to ask the right questions to the right people.

It's not uncommon for clients to admit they were hesitant to hire an outside partner to conduct their brand audit. The reason is typically something around the fact that a third party doesn't understand your business as well as your internal teams do – so why not have an internal team conduct the audit?

The reality is, not only are internal teams too close to the brand to be unbiased; they also aren't likely going to get the most honest answers from the people they interview or survey. Branding specialists may not understand the inner workings of your business but that's a good thing. We understand branding and its role in your businesses, which helps us to ask the right questions to the right people. This role also allows us to actively listen, reading both body language and verbal cues in interviews, which typically lead to deeper conversations about why people answer the way they do.

The information gathering element of your brand audit should include an assessment of your current brand and opportunities in the marketplace:

- Identity
- Perception
- Strategy
- Differentiation
- Positioning
- Level of awareness
- Existing equity
- Performance
- Architecture (if applicable)

Nearly, if not all, of these should be part of the surveys, interviews and other information gathering you do as they can inform how to shift your strategy or make other adjustments in order to achieve long-term success. And the easiest way to uncover the best information is by partnering with someone who knows what to look for.

Why knowing what's said about your brand behind your back is so critical to your success.

Before engaging in a brand audit, ask yourself the following questions:

Why do you feel this is the right time for a brand audit?

What are you hoping to learn?

What does success look like—clarity on messaging, new brand identity, a significant shift from where your brand is today?

Invite every employee to participate.

Asking every employee for input helps them feel valued and brings greater insight into what's happening inside your company.

As a leader, one of the most meaningful things you can do during the rebranding process is to invite your employees to participate. Whether they're completing a survey or being interviewed, it demonstrates interest in their experiences and opinions about the company.

For larger organizations, gathering input from every member of the team can seem daunting, especially if your footprint spans all four corners of the country, or overseas. This is where surveys can play an integral role. Our methodology includes asking every employee the same questions touching on topics such as your vision, branding, business segments, challenges and opportunities. It creates space for them to share their thoughts on their time and where they feel most comfortable. Surveys can also make it easier to discover alignment, misalignment and areas where deeper probing is needed.

Simultaneously, we often recommend conducting one-on-one interviews with your company's "Mars Team". In its simplest form, these are the people you would choose to send to Mars to open another location. These should be individuals from different areas of your business who know enough and who have some skin in the game but who will also be honest and challenge norms if they feel there's a better opportunity for your brand. Like the surveys, these interviews consist of a series of the same questions to help bring meaningful insights to the forefront. Unlike the surveys, they allow us to ask deeper questions to clarify answers or explore certain topics beyond the initial response.

Determining the number of one-on-one interviews depends on the size of your company, how it's organized, the objectives of the project and who leaders identify as being part of their Mars Team.

Key considerations:

- Give some thought to who would be invited on your Mars Team. These people care about the company and where it's going.
- Consider categorizing employees by department. Their answers could be influenced by the area of the business they work in. This serves as a lens to consider as insights are pulled.
- Survey every single employee, even interns. The more information you can collect, the easier it can be to find valuable insights, including challenges and opportunities.

Ask your customers to share their experience.

In its purest form our job is to bring together these insights to paint the clearest picture of your brand today so that we can help design the clearest path forward to the brand you want to be in the future.

When we ask clients for a list of customers who would be willing to participate in a brand assessment, it's almost always followed by a deeper conversation about who and how many should be invited. Like internal interviews, there is no ideal number. It really comes down to the size and complexity of your business (multiple business segments, different departments, etc.), the goals of the project and budget. It can also be influenced by touch points such as retail locations, call centers, online engagement tools, etc.

Your brand architecture is an important part of deciphering who and how many customers to engage. If your business segments work as separate entities, it may make sense to interview several customers from each segment. If your business operates more as a branded house, the pool could be smaller. After discussing your brand architecture, we often lead the conversation to identifying customers who are not your biggest cheerleaders. Or at least not all of them should be.

In its purest form our job is to bring together these insights to paint the clearest picture of your brand today so that we can help design the clearest path forward to the brand you want to be in the future. Interviewing a mix of customers who have been exposed to your brand and the people within your company at varying levels and touchpoints is critical. By talking through the criteria for identifying the customers to be interviewed, it becomes easy to land on a comfortable number that will provide the input needed.

Key considerations:

- What are the touchpoints in your sales process? Do you have customers who have been exposed to most of these?
- Do you have longevity with any customers?
- Have you had to nurture any relationships? Maybe a few of your customers have had to work through challenges with your team.
- Have you received feedback from any customers? These might be the easiest to engage but again, they shouldn't all be major cheerleaders for your company.

Consider the opinions of other stakeholders.

Knowing what they see and care about can help you identify opportunities that are more difficult to see when you're living and breathing the brand.

Take a step back and think about your company from a broader perspective. In addition to employees and customers, consider the other stakeholders you may need to engage. Often this includes members of a board of directors, civic leaders or key vendors and partners you work closely with. This group likely came to know your brand in a different way than the others. Their unique understanding of who you are and what you do can benefit your brand audit in a few different ways.

First, they likely value your company for different reasons than your employees and customers. Knowing what they see and care about can help you identify opportunities that are more difficult to see when you're living and breathing the brand. While the thoughts and opinions of boards of directors can be valuable, you may need to evaluate how much weight to place in this segment. The rebranding process is a constant evaluation of what people are saying and why they're saying it. This is an ideal group to investigate what your purpose and vision mean to them. If they don't understand these elements, it is likely a good sign that your audience may not either.

Next, this group of stakeholders often have exposure to your customers or prospective customers. They can offer another way of looking at what your audiences need and want. Additionally, your vendor partners will likely share what they'd like to see change or what they value most, which can positively influence your business practices. Whether it's easy to recognize or not, the more you learn about what people feel about and need from you, the easier it becomes to align your business objectives with your brand strategy.

Key considerations:

- The effectiveness of your brand can be influenced by more people than your employees and customers, especially in today's digital environment. Consider who might be sharing your story on your behalf and engage them in this work.
- Gaining real-life examples of how their perception of your brand was shaped is incredibly valuable.
- It's important to know their initial impressions of your brand and their current perception.

Consider where prospective, and even former, customers fit in.

Learning more about your target audience can help to further refine who they are and what they value from your brand.

Identifying the right target audience(s) is an important part of the rebranding process. It can be helpful to consider an additional round of surveys or focus groups with prospective customers. First, it can help you determine if this audience reflects where you want the company to go. Learning more about your target audience can help to further refine who they are and what they value from your brand.

As consumer expectations evolve, your audience may change over time. Understanding this and how it could impact your brand can go a long way toward helping internal brand and marketing teams prepare for the future. Being able to adapt without losing sight of your brand strategy has never been more important.

It may sound impossible but it can be incredibly valuable to reach out to former customers to learn about their experiences with your brand. Consider those whose relationship ended amicable, possibly due to cost or some unforeseen circumstance. Although they can lead to some hard truths, these conversations can also bring the greatest clarity to opportunities.

Key considerations:

- From focus groups to online surveys, it's important to gain insight from your prospective customers or even people that may never purchase from you.
- It's possible you have former customers who would be willing to share their thoughts and experiences with your brand. And yes, they may even say positive things about it.

Input from others is the only way to see your brand for what it is.

While data and metrics have their place in a brand audit, there's something invaluable about engaging people in the process. It creates an opportunity to help employees feel heard and valued. It allows leaders to hear what's working and what's not in a very human way. This component of a brand audit also allows us to dig deeper into the relationships brands have with their stakeholders and customers.

By sifting through the personal stories, perceptions, desires and needs, the picture of what your brand means when you're not in the room becomes crystal clear. Even better, the path toward where you want your brand to go becomes more aligned with your long-term business objectives.

Our brand strategists can help you understand what people say and feel about your brand when you're not in the room. And it all begins with a thorough, people-centric brand audit.



 We're a pivotal-moment brand agency

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