

10 crucial questions to ask before rebranding

Rebranding will provide a solution
only if you can identify the problem



Where brands come true.

We're a national design company on a mission to help brands transform what is — to what could be.

The place to start

Rebranding is a serious investment.

That's why it shouldn't be undertaken on a whim. Just because you feel like it's time for a rebrand isn't enough of a reason. Brands don't have expiration dates. Rebranding because "everyone else is doing it" isn't a good enough reason, either.

There has to be a problem to solve.

You know your objectives and challenges, and you know the ones your organization hasn't been able to meet.

- Is the market shrinking?
- Do you have an outdated or a misleading image?
- Have you lost connection with your audience?
- Has your company evolved while its brand stagnated?
- Is your message disjointed, convoluted or just plain confused?

Now you're thinking.

The first step in any journey is to select a destination. With rebranding, that means identifying the problem. Without knowing the problem there can be no solution. And don't have the misconception that rebranding by itself is the solution. It is a process comprised of several essential steps all specifically designed to take your organization from point A to point B. A rebrand is the journey, and in this case, it is the destination that counts.

Let's take a look at those questions.

QUESTION 01

What is the problem?

Aside from the few people who have an annual physical, the vast majority of us go to the doctor when we have a problem. It can be a cough, or a pain, or a fever or a combination of any of the above. Even if it's as general as, "My back hurts," we still have a problem we can describe. It's up to the doctor to ask more questions, develop a diagnosis and determine the proper prescription, treatment or therapy. That is the process that will deliver a solution to the patient.

Rebranding works in a similar way.

An organization is experiencing something. The company has become fragmented and needs to rediscover its mission. There is a merger about to take place and the resulting identity needs to be developed. The identity no longer aligns with the company's true archetype. The competitive landscape has changed. Customer demographics have changed. Your organization's culture NEEDS to change. It could be any one of several reasons — or a combination.

You can't get anywhere by standing still. And until you identify the problem — regardless of the specific elements — you can't begin to move forward.

Being able to clearly articulate your problem is the first step — and perhaps the most important step — toward developing a solution.

QUESTION 02

Who needs to be involved in your rebrand?

It sounds like a simple question but you wouldn't believe how many top-level decision-makers get this one wrong. That's because they turn everything over to their marketing staff and wait for a presentation to be scheduled on their calendar.

It isn't that simple.

To begin, the head of the organization/CEO/President needs to be involved in a rebrand from the very beginning. And they need to stay involved. Too often, a committee is appointed to work on the specifics, then the members disregard the most innovative and unorthodox concepts because they fear "it's too far out of the box" for their CEO to even consider. Having him or her as part of those discussions eliminates that worry. You'll know the answer by the look on their face.

You also have to involve the head of marketing, the head of operations, the head of finances and in some cases the top manager of each division or office. These are the people who create buy-in. Their input adds the perspective of various areas throughout the organization.

Don't overlook the people on the front line: The longest tenured employee who has seen it all, and especially any rank-and-file person who you suspect may be your biggest skeptic. It's better to have their voice heard from the beginning than for them to become a vocal opponent later.

And don't forget the people you serve: Your customers, clients, patients and your potential customers, clients and patients. Whether it's an informal survey or a well-organized series of focus groups, gathering public input prior to a rebrand gives everyone a much better sense of how accepting your audience will be after the unveiling. There is also a distinct possibility that these surveys and interviews will highlight problems or issues perceived by the public are in your company's blindspot. Now is the best time to fix them, too.

QUESTION 03

What is the timeframe?

The most difficult projects are those without a specific timeline. Open-ended assignments are inherently unruly.

When no one feels the pressure to make a decision and move on, no one usually does.

Or, what can be worse, the decisions never stop coming. Changes keep being made down to the tiniest, most insignificant detail. That can not only delay a rebrand significantly, it can also take all the fun out of it. People become so weary with the forty-fifth version of a logo, or the nineteenth color scheme, that they start questioning everything — including whether a rebrand was the right thing to do in the first place.

- **Develop a specific timeframe that lays out every milestone, from the hiring of your consultant to the unveil.**
- **Make certain there is enough time allotted for design and feedback of all essential players, and the approval of any boards and governing bodies.**
- **Deadlines can be adjusted but they have to be set in the first place. Rebrands should be meaningful, not painful, and having a schedule will define the boundaries.**

QUESTION 04

What is our brand promise?

If everything about your company was peeled away right down to the core, what would that core be? Kindness? Innovation? Service? Love? Wisdom? Leadership?

Determine what you stand for — your brand promise — and embrace it completely.

Look at Allstate Insurance. When you read the following words: “You’re in good hands with Allstate,” whose voice did you hear? It probably wasn’t your own. It was the deep, distinctive, reassuring voice of Dennis Haysbert. Feel better? Now, who protects you from mayhem? Allstate. Americans have been made to feel that without Allstate insurance, we aren’t safe. The company’s brand gurus have taken one of the most mind-numbing experiences, that of sitting with an insurance agent for an hour or two, and turned it into a positive experience. That’s because the company realizes its archetype, the Caregiver, and has promoted it to the nth degree.

The same is true when branding an organization. The brand is the people, the feelings delivered from person to person, and the goal is the same — make a lasting connection.

Think of the American Red Cross. What do you see? Disasters, most likely. And people rushing in to help. People who care. Carrying a child. Passing out food. Searching a pile of debris. The images may be awful but the feeling is positive, emotional, satisfying. So when you hear of the next major earthquake, tornado or flood, what is the first way you think of helping, even from a thousand miles away? By donating to the American Red Cross. Their brand essence is sleeves up, hearts open, all in. And, that guides all that they do.

Whether promoting a service or a product, the heart of your brand has to be the same — and it has to beat from within.

QUESTION 05

What is our brand personality?

If you don't know who you are, you can't begin to communicate your message to the people in your organization and the public.

Are you a leader or a worker bee? Do you prefer a table for two or a party room? A stadium show or headphones? A four-star hotel or a campsite with a billion stars overhead? All of these are facets of your character. They are what you see in yourself and what others see in you. Put together, they are your personality.

Brands have personalities too. How do you determine your brand's personality? Think of five or six words you believe describe your company. Words like honest. Courageous. Clever. Rebellious. Traditional. Bold. Now reach out to your customers. Pick a few who you've known and who have known you for years. Ask them to list five or six words that describe your company. See if they match your list. If they all match, outstanding! Your brand's personality is clear and consistent. But if only one or two match, you've got some work to do. And if none matches, you're in serious need of a rebrand.

Personality puts the "person" in your brand and gives it life. If you want it to make a connection, it has to be real.

A great way to determine your personality is to determine your archetype. Each person has an archetype. They may not know it, but if given the opportunity to explore the subject, they would find they have features, qualities, values and characteristics that can collectively identify their personalities. Maybe you are a Rebel. Maybe you are a Sage, or a Hero, an Explorer or a Creator. Whether or not you realize it, there are things you do, say, think, wear and purchase that help identify your core self.

The same is true for companies. For example, Coca-Cola's archetype is the Innocent. Whether it's teaching the world to sing or spending every Christmas season with the polar bear family, Coke embraces unity and simplicity. Ride the wave. Nothing better than sipping an ice cold Coke. With family. At home. Ahhh.

Coke's red-white-and-blue rival, Pepsi, falls more toward the Explorer archetype. New. Modern. Daring but not too wild; loud and fun but not crazy, Pepsi doesn't try to evoke the past. Instead, Pepsi races toward the future. Refreshing? Maybe. Fun? You betcha. Just ask Beyoncé.

But neither Coke nor Pepsi tries to be everything to everyone. They know their archetype and they have built their brands around it. That's what you need to do.

It's your personality. Let it show.

QUESTION 06

What is our brand purpose?

Again, this one may sound obvious but only on the surface. You may think your brand's purpose is to help you sell X or serve Y, but it must go beyond the economics.

Successful brands make a real connection with their audience.

They don't communicate based on "Here's what we're doing." They tell the public, "Here's why we are doing this."

Clearly defining your brand purpose tells the world your reason for existing. It takes you beyond the public's perception that "we're in it for the profits," even if your stockholders are. You want the public to know "we're in it to make lives better." Whether you deliver cancer treatments or manufacture energy-efficient table lamps, it's all about revealing your noblest intentions.

Once you define your purpose, let the world know, starting with your own employees. If the people in your manufacturing plant believe they are assembling the best damn lamps in the world, saving consumers money and conserving energy, the public will believe it, too. That's a connection that will last.

Purpose-driven branding not only tells people why you are here today, it will keep you around longer tomorrow.

QUESTION 07

What do our customers feel about our brand – and what do we want them to feel about it?

The answer amounts to one of the most integral aspects of a brand platform, the brand positioning. Like an arrow aimed at a target's center, brand positioning means that all brand activity produces a singular positive result. It's what you want the consumer to think of first. Immediately. It's an image they could recognize with their eyes closed. Like the Target stores' symbolic red bull's eye, it can mean only one thing. One place. One brand.

Positioning is the quality of a brand that makes it iconic. It is focus. It creates a place in the market that only your brand can occupy.

It doesn't eliminate your competitors. It sets you apart. And when it works, when it is truly distinctive, it places you ahead of them. It's the reason customers come to you and keep coming back. It's the offer you make and the promise you fulfill all rolled into one concept.

To determine what your customers feel about your brand, ask them. Utilize the following research models to access the pulse of your customers:

- **online surveys**
- **person-on-the-street interviews**
- **focus groups**

It doesn't have to be an in-depth essay from each. Just a word or two will do. And when you start seeing a commonality or repetition of the words people are choosing, don't ignore it. Even if it goes against what you are thinking. And if it's negative, go ahead and take it personally. Then do something about it.

QUESTION 08

Is this rebrand an evolution or a revolution?

Is the goal of your rebrand a modest change or a substantial one? Not only does the thought process change with each, but also the groundwork for what comes after the rebrand is unveiled.

Evolution is spurred from within. It's a change because something inside the organization just isn't right. It's a corrective measure; a minor adjustment. And because it isn't earth-shattering, it is easier to anticipate and accept. Like Starbucks tweaking its siren logo a few years back. Even without the words "Starbucks" and "coffee," people didn't get lost looking for the nearest store. A few people complained, but they did it between sips.

Revolution is commonly a response to factors outside the company. Whether it's a reaction to a changing marketplace or a drastic measure to overcome a challenging economy, a revolutionary rebrand is a bold move and has to be communicated as such.

What is missing when most companies change their brands and simply throw it out to the public is proper,

effective communication. They launch what may be a fantastic new brand but because they do it suddenly and independently of thoughtful, clever communication, they don't create excitement. They create instant disconnect from the people they most want to please.

An open, constant line of communication with the people you serve is an important element of any brand platform and especially a rebrand. You can't tell your customers what you stand for. You have to show them. Build on that overlap between what you stand for and what your customers stand for. That's your common ground.

And when you change your brand, product line or your service area, tell people why. Take advantage of that common ground and dig into it. It's where the treasure is buried.

QUESTION 09

How will we maintain our existing brand's equity – if we want to?

Some organizations build their brands into household names. They are well-respected and recognized. Still, there is a way to be better. A way to move forward while not losing the priceless brand equity that has been established over time.

Other organizations want nothing to do with the past. They want to drive a Ferrari that has no rear view mirrors.

Signaling change and still conducting “business as usual” can be a double-edged sword. There is a delicate balance to maintaining the brand equity you've built while embarking on a vision for the future. It usually lies in the subtleties of some of the changes you make.

A rebrand can include a new identity yet still retain some of the visuals your customers will find familiar.

- **The name can stay the same but a bold new visual presence can be implemented.**
- **A logo can change while the colors it utilizes remain the same or change only slightly.**
- **A known theme song or other mental trigger can be incorporated into a rebrand.**

These are things to be discussed with your consultant during the rebrand process. They are your trusted guide leading you past all the hidden trapdoors. This may be your first rebrand, but it better not be theirs.

QUESTION 10

How can we encourage a bottom-up groundswell of support for the rebrand, instead of a top-down mandate?

Look in the mirror. What do you see? That's how a brand is supposed to work. Your brand needs to be an accurate reflection and projection of your organization. And with a rebrand, your entire organization must see themselves in the new brand. Each person needs to eagerly accept what it represents and its purpose.

Collectively, they need to act as ambassadors and advocates for the rebrand.

Everyone in your organization has something they stand for; something they hold dear. Overall, your organization has values and beliefs it stands for and holds dear. The magic lies where your people and your organization's values and beliefs overlap.

A rebrand's best chance of succeeding comes when everyone clearly sees themselves as a vital part of the whole organization and its mission, values, vision and purpose.

This isn't something they can be told to do.

They need to find it for themselves.

Don't stop now.

What makes a brand tip towards remarkable?

It is the ability to be as human as possible. Just like us, brands need to keep learning and doing. They need to advance or risk stagnation, loss of identity – and purpose. A brand must keep moving forward, growing, responding.

All this gives a brand life. And a brand is most alive when the value of what it means to us is greater than the value of what it does.

If that isn't your brand, it's time for a change. Because changing a brand does not sacrifice it.

It keeps it alive.

Considering a rebrand?

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