

intelligence vault
MARKETING**how to conduct a brand audit****~ Mark Healy / Partner / Torque**

There's a great line delivered by Laurence Fishburne in the movie *The Matrix*: "You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind..." Ever feel that way about your business? That things are fine. But... You just feel that something is not quite right. Everything looks good operationally. But sales are okay, not great. Maybe you find yourself having to explain your value proposition, even though it's written on your website. Maybe your sales reps tell you they are having trouble closing. It's time for an audit.

A thorough and not always more time intensive means of tackling the problem at hand is to conduct a brand audit. This study marries the best of internal and external perspectives. There are inherent objectivity risks tied to brand audits, so let's talk about how to mitigate those before discussing the key components of a good brand audit.

The obvious option is to get outside help. To hire a consultant or an agency – an independent 3rd party – to design and conduct the study. This eliminates bias. For an SMB though, this can be cumbersome and/or cost prohibitive. A second means of eliminating, or at least minimizing objectivity risk, is to conduct this marketing audit with a focus on brand in-house, but around a well designed and rigorous process:

Who – the owner/operator should be involved, but not lead the study. There is just too much risk of personal opinions clouding any questions which will be asked or any analysis then undertaken. The project leader should come from the ranks or the management team.

What – the process. First, many groups need to be engaged to get maximum perspective. Second, each of the groups must be asked the same set of questions, so that answers can be compared. (More on the actual questions below.) The questions should be designed by more than one person, and then vetted by many people in the business – looking for leading questions. For example: a leading question would be "How valuable are our services to you?", while an unbiased version of the question would be "On a scale of 1-10, where 1 = poor and 10 = excellent, what rating would you put on the value of our services?"

Okay, so what is a brand audit, anyway? What will it achieve and how is it done?

Brand Audit: a brand audit is a holistic way of looking at a business, and more specifically a business' value proposition married to the way it interfaces with the world (marketing). The orientation is definitely around the brand/messaging/promise portrayed inside the firm and outside the firm. The audit will involve putting together a framework which will allow you to ask the right questions to everyone who touches your firm, and give you the answers to your nagging concerns. A core set of questions will be asked of every group – from employees to customers to suppliers.

Here are the components of a basic brand audit, and how they are used:

1. Metric design.

My engineering professors used to tell me back in the day that it is a bad idea to measure if you don't have the right measuring stick. This is the stage to build the measuring stick. You have to decide what is going to be included in scope and what is going to be left out. These elements will be central to all aspects of the audit, so that results can be compared later. Some good elements to include and measure are: clarity of value proposition,



clarity of strengths and differentiators, brand recognition, sales & marketing materials effectiveness, appropriateness of pricing, perception of quality and corporate image effectiveness.

2. Study/question design.

Now that you have decided what you are trying to assess and/or measure, the next step is to design study areas and questions that will yield data. A good study design includes six areas: internal analysis, competitive assessment, supplier perspective, current customer analysis, past customer analysis, and potential customer assessment. In other words, no matter how simple or complicated you want to get with your audit, you should talk with folks from each of these groups, asking for input on what you can do better or more consistently. (Note: clearly, you are going to have to be more creative than simply interviewing on the competitor front.) The questions you ask should flow from the metrics you outlined in step 1 above. For example, clarity of value proposition could merit more than one question asked to each group. Questions here could include: "If you were to describe our services to someone else, what would you say?" and "What makes us better than our competitors?"

Other important questions to ask, regardless of study design specifics:

- If you had \$1 million to spend on my business, what would you spend it on?
- What are we worst at? How could we fix it?
- Is our branding consistent with what we do and how we act?
- Do our website and do our marketing materials/ads accurately 'sell' our message?

3. Study execution.

At some point the planning has to end and the doing has to start. Executing the study means assigning the appropriate party (somebody from your team or an outside expert) the task of carrying out interviews with people from each group/study area identified. The exception to the rule is on the competitive side, where a more guerilla approach is required to see how competitors are doing business – that is a topic for another day. Internal interviews tend to be longer than those with customers, etc. Internal folks will normally have stronger opinions and more context – plan for 45 min to 1 hr for each. External interviews with customers and suppliers can be as short as 5 min over the phone, although you should choose current and past customers wisely. In terms of numbers, you could survey as many as thousands of potential customers or interview as few as five or six current customers – just be aware that you lose statistical validity with smaller pool sizes.

4. Study analysis.

The analysis should be pretty straightforward. You are looking for two things: themes and differences in answers between groups.

Thematic analysis can only really be done manually – you have to pick through all the raw data, particularly quotes, looking for common messages (such as 'your sales materials don't really tell me what you do').

A good way to do the comparative analysis is to use the answers from the internal interviews as the anchor (since what your own people believe is where you are starting from as a business), and then compare the answers from the other groups against this data. You can turn the answers into numbers and graph or tabulate the data – it doesn't matter much how you look at it, the point is to compare the points of view. Some call this a gap analysis. Clearly if your customers or potential customers, for example, don't see your value proposition the way you do, you have an issue to correct.

The goal at the end of this is accuracy and consistency: everything you do should accurately portray your brand, and the branding and messaging should be delivered consistently. A brand audit, whether basic or complex, can be a powerful tool in jumpstarting your business.



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