

Research is Key to Effective Branding, Positioning and Messaging

By Deb Siegle, Partner
US Marketing Services

Do you want to make sure your branding, positioning and messaging are on target? Do you want to resonate with your market and differentiate your company or product from the competition? You can do it all—effectively—as long as you do your research first.

Long before your message goes out, solid research will help you zero in on what is most important to your target audiences. This white paper discusses how solid research can play an essential role in branding, positioning and messaging. It walks you through how to use research to uncover the core drivers that establish and refine these important identity elements.

BRAND AND MESSAGING RESEARCH DRIVE BETTER BUSINESS RESULTS

A brand embodies the organization, product, person or issue it represents. It evokes an emotional response, and it supports positioning, messaging and marketing efforts.

Brand  Positioning, messaging, marketing

The more effective a brand is, the greater its success in connecting with a market. It follows that the more that can be done to refine a brand, to ensure it resonates with target customers and prospects, the stronger the marketing programs and resulting brand awareness will be.

The ultimate goals of a brand promise are to:

- Create strong brand preference
- Increase goodwill
- Stimulate buying behavior
- Cement loyalty
- Generate referrals
- Build trust

The more you can refine your brand, the better the results will be for your company, as evidenced by:

- Increased brand recognition
- Greater market share
- Better sales success
- Increased customer retention

And as is often the case, a slight adjustment or “tweak” can make a huge impact. Look at how golfers constantly fine-tune their swing.

In branding, positioning and messaging, research plays an essential role, making it possible to gather and decipher relevant feedback so that you consistently hit home-runs—and increase sales, revenues and profits.

RESEARCH MAKES SENSE

Conducting research is especially effective in the following situations:

New Company/New Brand

Goal: Understand how to define and position a new brand in a competitive marketplace in order to trigger sales, acceptance, and support.

While it is tempting to begin designing the logo of a new company immediately, it is ultimately more beneficial to first conduct research to identify what motivates your target audience. This enables you to develop a compelling brand and position as well as to understand clearly what your target audience considers the best “look and feel”.

Example: New Company launches in the U.S. with a network application analysis tool that competes with a well-established market giant whose tool is considered the “industry standard.”

Approach: The company uses research to understand how it needs to brand, name and position itself so that it can quickly gain market traction and augment customers’ toolsets, instead of displacing the giant directly.

Existing Company/Brand Elasticity

Goal: Determine whether or not customers will accept or support a new product, service or line of business.

This concern most typically arises when a company plans to do one of the following:

- Offer a new product or service
- Implement a strategy to generate a new revenue stream
- Change or add target markets
- Enter new geographies, especially other countries

Example: Research Medical Center, known for successfully treating patients with complex, rare diagnoses, wants to strengthen its primary care practice.

Approach: The facility uses research to gain an understanding of what motivates primary care referrals, how to position itself and how to deliver to be seen as a patient- and doctor-friendly medical center, as well as a world-class diagnostic and treatment center.

Merging Companies/Brand Architecture

Goal: Retain current customers and attract new ones.

One of the desired outcomes of a merger is that the new company generates more top-line revenues and is more profitable than the two separate entities.

As it relates to branding and positioning, the new entity must decide whether to maintain individual brands, develop a new one or retire one brand and let the other carry the flag for both entities going forward. Management's critical concern is that any new branding and positioning must be embraced by both existing customers and prospects.

Examples:

Company/Brand	Post Merger Branding
HP/Compaq	Both brands are currently being maintained, with Compaq associating with the HP brand.
AT&T/SBC	The SBC brand was retired and the new "at&t" reigns.
Adobe/Macromedia	The Macromedia brand was retired.
Oracle/PeopleSoft/Siebel	The PeopleSoft and Siebel brands have become productized, with the Oracle brand subsuming all.

Research helps direct these decisions so that maximum results are achieved in terms of creating the brand or brand architecture most likely to be embraced by new and existing customers.

Managing Brands

Goal: Stay on track. Keep improving and further strengthening the brand.

Smart companies develop and implement brand marketing plans. They use research to measure and determine trends in awareness, visibility, attitudes and behaviors for the company and brand—and vis-à-vis the competition. These companies develop standard branding guides to ensure consistent and proper brand expression.

Examples: Nikon, Sony and Jell-O come to mind as companies that consistently manage their brands well.

Revitalize Company/Revitalize Brand

Goal: Address and adjust to market changes and evolving customer needs.

In this scenario, companies are disproportionately losing customers, especially their targeted and most profitable ones, to the competition. The brand has lost its value and relevance, and can be considered "tired."

Example: Manufacturer of precision engineered components in business for 30 years relies on pre-Internet marketing and business operating practices. Refreshing its brand and marketing results in 43% growth just a year after kicking off a re-branding and re-positioning strategy and campaign.

Approach: This company uses research to define a new brand promise and positioning strategy, as well as an invigorated marketing strategy and campaigns.

Companies typically use research in a situation like this to:

- Identify remaining brand equity
- Define new brand promises
- Reposition the brand to target audiences
- Create new tag lines/logos
- Create new messaging

Gaps in Delivery from the Brand Promise

Goal: Identify the most important areas of divergence from your target audiences' perspective and re-establish alignment with these high-priority values.

Example: A major petroleum company touts its green initiatives and philosophies. Yet, it is accused of committing major environmental abuses. The company is in recovery mode, attempting to re-establish its reputation and operations.

Research identifies the core values that are currently most important to your target audiences—and those that will trigger buying behavior or loss of business to competitors.

Research also can help a company to take corrective action where it delivers the greatest return on investment, and value to its target audiences.

Generally, the goals of research are to:

- Provide new knowledge or validate/invalidate existing beliefs and perceptions
- Prompt action
- Provide better information for decision-making
- Provide insights into underlying behavioral motivators, whether the behavior is purchase, loyalty or active support

USE RESEARCH TO DELIVER ACTIONABLE FINDINGS

Research must be grounded in providing insights into the core drivers of choice:

- Why your customers support your company and buy your product
- Why they stay with your company/product
- Why they abandon your company/product

At the end of the day, research findings should tell you:

- Why customers choose your brand over competing brands
- The products/services/features that will meet with the greatest success and acceptance
- The sources of trust for your company/product
- Who and what most strongly influence purchase and loyalty
- Key messaging and positioning that resonates with your target audiences

Numerous techniques and exercises elicit insightful and directional feedback. Especially when focusing on branding and messaging alternatives, it is critical to dive deep to uncover core motivators and engage respondents “where they live”. Qualitative research vehicles are usually best for discovering the mindset behind preferences. The probing that is part of the qualitative process yields insights into motivators of behavior.

Typical examples of the types of qualitative research vehicles that support these deep dives are focus groups and one-on-one interviews, usually conducted in person or by telephone. Internet surveys can be combined with them to gather feedback on specific brand promise or positioning statements and other messaging elements.

You will want to consider the following variables when choosing the most appropriate research vehicle:

- What you want to learn
- The scope of your research topic
- How much probing is required
- Your audience
- Subject matter and level of complexity

In addition to actively listening to feedback, you must be able to translate it. Expert interpretation is the key to producing actionable research findings. Knowing how to ask questions is important, but being able to interpret the results is even more so, especially when you are uncovering motivators of behavior or choice and emotional responses and connections.

Research is both art and science, which is why third-party experts are frequently brought in to conduct it and analyze the results. And because they offer anonymity, respondents also feel “safe” to tell the full story.

Ultimately, what you are digging for are causal drivers of choice and behavior, which typically fall into two categories:

Foundational drivers	Leverageable drivers
Foundational drivers are like table stakes in poker. Without them, you are not in the game. However, they give you no extra points.	These triggers truly <i>differentiate</i> you from the pack. They motivate your target audience on a deeper level.

Use research to define and refine your branding, positioning and messaging. It is an upfront investment that pays off in more highly effective marketing, product and service delivery that resonates with your customers and prospects.