

5 Lessons From NBC's 'The Voice' on How to Differentiate Your Brand

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During the blind auditions of NBC's *The Voice*, the coaches are the ultimate shoppers. As they listen to countless contestants sing, they have to decide which ones they want to work with. The situation is not unlike a consumer standing in front of a shelf of toothpaste, or driving down a street lined with fast food restaurants, or browsing an online shopping site, overwhelmed: *how to decide among all these choices?*



Whether on a reality show or in real life, the options that stand out—the *differentiated* ones—are the ones that usually get chosen. “I’m looking for something I haven’t heard before,” explained one of *The Voice* coaches. Countless research studies show consumers use the same criteria when evaluating brands.

It makes sense. Being different makes something more salient, more memorable, more of a personal expression—and it makes it less easy to compare or confuse with other options.

So how can you increase your brand differentiation? Try these approaches, tested and used by the contenders on *The Voice*.

1. Break away from the convention. It’s pretty much a given that the singers cover current singles and classic hits. That’s why one contestant got through to the next round, because he chose to break away from the convention of singing a classic, by singing an opera song instead. The move not only conveyed courage and creativity, but also allowed him to do what he does best.

Likewise, marketers should boldly challenge the norms of their categories. Choose to do something unexpected, something that showcases your strength. Employ a different distribution channel. Make something standard while everyone else charges a fee for it. Promote a different usage occasion. Not only will you stand out, people will give you props for breaking the rules.

2. Specialize in a market. While some vocalists wanted to position themselves as well-rounded or versatile performers, the ones who nailed a specific sound were the ones who caught the coaches’ attention. Coach Blake Shelton perked up because one contestant delivered a spot-on rendition of a popular country song. His quintessential country sound appealed to Blake’s own country specialization and differentiated the contestant from the others who tried to blend rock, folk or blues into their style.

Brands can also be differentiated through market specialization. Most companies try to appeal to as broad of an audience as possible because they don’t want to limit their business. But by positioning your brand to appeal specifically to a certain type of customer, you stand out as different and are perceived as an expert.

3. Own an attribute. Embodying an attribute is another effective use of focus for differentiation. One contestant played up her diva-ness so much that she got coach and fellow diva Christina Aguilera on stage to sing with her. Wearing 5-inch heels and decked out to a tee, the self-described diva belted out a song by Mary J. Blige and made it clear that she was a force to be reckoned with.

Being clear, focused and 100 percent committed to a specific attribute can help marketers make their brands stand out. Purity is the attribute that has fueled the success of *Ivory soap* for 125 years. *Volvo* will always be associated with safety and *FedEx*, with reliability.

4. Promote an attitude. Sometimes singers, and products, aren't particularly exceptional or different. But that doesn't mean it's not possible to differentiate. As a duo of pop singers demonstrated in their blind audition, a stand-out attitude can compensate for lack of more substantive differentiation. They had so much fun on stage and were successful in getting the audience to have fun, coach Cee Lo Green could sense their unique attitude even with his back to them.

Similarly, a strong attitude can differentiate a brand. By embodying a distinctive personality or adopting a specific stance, you can make an indelible impression on your target. Through a fun attitude, *Cuties California Mandarins* have managed to make a generic product like an orange seem special; Coca-Cola, Benetton and Axe are other examples of brands that promote a differentiated attitude.

5. Create a symbol. You can also differentiate a competitively-similar product with a salient symbol or cue. One contestant's symbol was a harmonica. He only played a few notes on the instrument, but it was enough to make Aguilera want him on her team. The harmonica seemed to convey there was something different and special about the contestant, even if that distinctiveness wasn't clear at the time.

Special packaging, a unique logo or remarkably creative *advertising* can serve a similar function. It can capture people's attention and suggest an indiscernible but important difference. Of course, you're better off with more substantive differences, but symbols and cues are helpful tools when other levers aren't as strong.

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