



The Fresh Factor

Q: How do you know when it's time to evolve your brand, and how do you determine what equity elements should be retained, reworked, or totally discarded?

—Chris Frank, Marketing Manager, Dining Services, Indiana University

A: You're smart to ask these questions, Chris. With today's consumers and our business environment changing rapidly, you always need to be thinking about how to keep your brand fresh and resonant.

To assess your brand's performance, I recommend you conduct a brand diagnostic. With a brand diagnostic, you look at your brand through three critical lenses:

Customers. You need to determine your target customer's needs, wants, usage occasions, and purchase and repurchase drivers. You also need to know how they've changed since you initially developed your brand. Is what you offer still relevant and valued?

Consumer research is the best method for collecting this information. Use qualitative research methodologies like one-on-one interviews or small group discussions to explore your target customer's feelings, values, and motivations. Quantitative surveys and new methods that capture customers' behaviors in the moment using social tools and new technology can help you develop a thorough profile of them and their purchase patterns.

Context. You should look at your competitive context to evaluate your brand's relative strengths and vulnerabilities. Also, look at the broader context to assess your brand's fit with category trends and macro factors including the economy, cultural influences, and social trends.

Research can help here as well. Use quantitative brand-equity research to compare your brand and competitors on measures like brand awareness, brand associations, perceived differentiation, and perceived value. Do investigative audits of your brand experiences and communication and those of your key competitors—be detailed and thorough, taking note of what every element expresses about the brand. To understand how your brand is performing relative to the broader context, dig into industry data and trend reports.

Company. Finally, take stock of your product, service, and experience. Conduct interviews with stakeholders, including executives, employees, vendors, and agencies, to identify the core capabilities of your organization, underutilized assets and resources, and potential new value propositions.

Employee research is also important to understand your

culture and how that impacts the customer experience and, ultimately, brand perceptions. Ask frontline employees for insights about your customers and your competitors—they often have the best perspective on how strong your brand really is.

Once you've gathered all of this information and insight, conduct an objective-based SWOT analysis: Determine your brand's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats relative to your business objective. Then you can determine whether or not a brand evolution is in order. If it's time for a change, start with strategy and planning. Revisit your brand platform and update your brand's defining values and attributes. Revise your competitive positioning to reflect the new needs and wants of your target customers, as well as the new competitive landscape and your optimal position in it.

You should also develop a customer experience map that lays out how you want your brand to be experienced. Specify the products, services, facilities, technologies, and sensory aspects you need to change in order to serve your target customers.

It may be that a few small changes to your menu or to your visual identity are all that's needed. In other instances, a more thorough repositioning and rebranding is called for. You should be ready, willing, and able to let go of anything that stands in the way of making your brand relevant.

It's also important that you lay out a clear plan for your brand evolution. Put down on paper what needs to change, how you will change it, and the responsibilities and timeline for implementing the change. Use this plan to develop a communications campaign for employees and customers alike. You need to tell the story about why and how you're changing. Let people know what to expect and establish a dialogue with them so they can give you feedback as you evolve.

Seattle's Best Coffee provides an informative example of the steps that lead to a successful brand evolution. Several years ago, a thorough diagnostic evaluation of the brand led its president, Michelle Gass, to conclude that it didn't have emotional resonance. The company took on a new mission to make its premium coffee simple and easily accessible, and it developed plans for new partnerships, retail products, packaged goods, and a new brand identity. Gass's team created a fun video for internal employees and external stakeholders and launched a new ad campaign. Recent company reports indicate Seattle's Best is on track to meet its goal of becoming a billion-dollar brand.

Knowing when and how to evolve your brand is tricky. It takes discernment, courage, and perseverance. But if Seattle's Best is any indication, evolution is critical to continued growth. 