

How to measure your branding

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By Nick Westergaard

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Apple, Nike and Starbucks didn't appear on the scene as fully formed brands with fiercely loyal customers. (Associated Press)

Yes, I'm a big believer in brands and branding. Yes, I put the latter in air quotes in the title of this piece.

No, I'm not questioning the importance or existence of branding. If anything, what should be in air quotes is the phrase "measuring branding."

Measuring branding. It's a famously squishy topic.

Most universally recognize the importance of brands. The Nikes, Apples and Starbucks of the world have seen to this.

But when leaders internally rightfully ask marketers about ROI and accountability ...? Crickets.

We don't know what to say.

On one hand, there's usually a plea that, "You can't always measure the awesomeness that is a great brand."

However, this is often a veneer meant to hide the availability of relevant metrics and key performance indicators.

On the other hand, measuring branding as a premise doesn't quite put the focus where it should be. Hence my use of air quotes.

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So how can we get better at measuring branding or something like it?

First, some definitions

"Hi, my name is Nick and I'm a word nerd." (Hi, Nick!)

As we strive to get our arms around better measurement, definitions can be foundational and provide a much needed level set.

When it comes to branding we often say ... well, branding. But I think we can do better than that.

To many, when you say branding — especially in the Midwest, it conjures up images of branding cattle.

While this is a related practice with a relevant correlation to our work (identifying products and communicating value), it's practiced very differently.

Branding livestock is something done to another passive, captive party. Just ask the cow.

What most of us in branding and marketing are doing today is something more complex and dynamic. We're building something with meaning that stands out in our crowded, distracted world.

And we're often building this with our customers and the community at large.

That's why I prefer to label this work as brand building.

When building something, it's best to start with an goal in mind. This insight gets us a step closer to measurement.

What's your brand doing — or trying to do?

More word-nerdery! To better measure brand success, we need to connect our goal or objective to the brand.

This helps get us beyond the general squishiness of "measuring branding" and closer to meaningful metrics. Closer to what is actually happening as a result of the brand that's been built.

Here are some of the more common and measurable aspects of brand building:

Brand awareness — More often than not, brand-building itself is an effort to increase your awareness in the marketplace.

Whether you're starting from scratch or a less-than-desirable share of the market, your key performance indicators are always the same.

What does your market share look like before your brand-building efforts and what does it look like now?

Brand growth — Similar to brand awareness, this goal speaks to enhancing the brand in new markets or new segments of a market.

Once again, your key performance indicators would be awareness-based. Where did you start out and where did you end up?

Brand loyalty — Loyalty adds the dimensions of time and frequency to your customers' connection to your brand.

How many have kept buying year after year? Are they purchasing more or escalating their commitment to your brand?

Brand protection — When crisis strikes your brand, you can measure your intervention efforts by looking at similar before-and-after data sets to determine if your brand is holding steady or losing ground.

This list isn't everything by any means. Sometimes you're using brand to have an impact on sales.

And if you have a clearly defined sales funnel, you may be able to connect brand to your overall demand generation efforts.

But brand doesn't start and stop at the sales funnel.

In the end, you have to make sure your definition of brand and brand-building is as active as possible.

"Remember that your brand is a verb," writes Denise Lee Yohn in her book, "What Great Brands Do." "Your brand is not your image; your brand is what you do."

Brands are both powerful and measurable. However, there's no way around the hard work.

Nike, Apple and Starbucks didn't appear on the scene as fully formed brands with fiercely loyal customers. These relationships were built and carefully managed over time.

The same holds true for measuring your brand's success. There's no easy metrics like followers or likes that you can quickly grab and share.

You have to ask and answer the hard questions to get at something meaningful to your organization and its unique goals.

As Tom Hanks's character coaches in the movie, "A League of Their Own," "It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."

Answering your own hard questions can help ensure that your brand is a great brand — and a measurable brand — for years to come.

Nick Westergaard is marketing strategist, keynote speaker and author of "Brand Now" and "Get Scrappy"; nick@branddrivendigital.com; [@NickWestergaard](https://twitter.com/NickWestergaard)



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