

# Marketing News

APRIL 29, 2002 / A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION

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## Survey your employees for complete brand picture

By ALIZA STEIN

**S**o your company is about to position, or reposition, one of its brands. For this delicately balanced process of brand development, much has been written about the importance of conducting qualitative research with target consumers, getting their input on current brand associations, potential for brand differentiation, and the level of brand resonance, among other topics. However, little has been written about the value of gaining the same inputs and perspectives from internal stakeholders – in particular, management and employees of the organization – who should be integral to, if not the most tangible manifestations of, a holistic brand experience.

### SPECIAL REPORT

In fact, obtaining qualitative input from internal audiences can be critical to inventing or reinventing the brand, whether it's done via one-on-one interviews, focus groups or some other research vehicle, for a number of different reasons.

Perhaps one of the more obvious reasons is to gain a 360-degree picture of the brand; that is, to understand more dimensions of the current brand, whether they are positive, negative or neutral.

For example, a nationally-ranked MBA program interested in improving its ranking recently began undertaking steps to reposition its brand. The process included conducting focus groups and one-on-one interviews with six groups of internal and external stakeholders. A key reason why the organization chose to include internal audiences in the qualitative research process was to “allow for thoroughness and to understand the brand from a variety of angles. We needed to have full opinions and hear the good with the bad,” according to the program's director of marketing.

A brand's heritage – those attributes associated with its history, philosophy and *raison d'être* – is one of its key dimensions, most likely instilled by the brand's founders. Internal audiences can have invaluable insight into the brand's history and probably understand that history's importance better than most stakeholder audiences.

If they can share their understanding of a brand's heritage, it may help re-establish brand continuity, connecting the brand's future positioning to its roots and the facets that made it successful and enduring in the first place. Balancing that heritage against new brand positioning opportunities gleaned from external audiences or other stakeholders is tricky, yet essential.

Doing qualitative research among internal audiences also helps determine where patterns, and diverging opinions, exist between internal and external audiences, which can help the marketing team formulate the brand hypothesis and identify subsequent research areas.

Particularly when individuals from a variety of functional areas or product lines that have brand contact are included in the qualitative research, the employee audience's diversity helps ensure that marketers have tapped a greater number of brand perspectives. Their feedback can be particularly helpful to marketers trying to ascertain whether the organization's (or internal) “truth” about the brand matches the market's (or external) “truth” about the brand, why these truths differ, and how they are shaped within the organization.

For the MBA program mentioned above, the most enlightening areas of the research “were the differences between the (internal audiences’) opinions of the brand and what the students said,” the marketing director says. “There is a broad disparity between what an MBA (from this school) means to these two audiences.”

In fact, different truths about the brand can exist even within internal audiences. For the MBA program “with the staff, there's a difference in opinion in how they all affect delivery of the brand to the student audience,” according to the marketing director. Understanding current brand perceptions and how they developed can help marketing teams change future brand perceptions by ensuring

that a more cohesive view of the brand emerges.

In instances in which marketers are developing a completely new brand, internal audiences can provide valuable input to the corporate vision, brand vision, and

the values with which the new brand should be aligned. Furthermore, if the brand is to remain true to its values and become a meaningful experience for the customer or user, it should be aligned with the company's organizational culture. If employees are going to be able to act as brand ambassadors – if they are to believe in what the brand stands for enough to communicate the brand experience and help create the brand culture – then it makes sense to get input from these internal stakeholders. In fact, employees can be an important source of new ideas for initiatives that can strengthen the overall brand experience, especially if the

effort to tap those ideas involves all areas of the company, whether organized by function, product line or along some other lines. So, the same groups of internal stakeholders who can provide input to help drive brand positioning can also help identify key initiatives and efforts geared toward strengthening the brand from the inside out.

Of course, another important reason for canvassing internal opinion is perhaps more political, but still psychologically important: Doing so allows internal audiences to have a say in brand development and feel they have ownership in the resulting brand position. Not only does getting input from managers and other employees make brand buy-in easier, but marketers can more quickly identify internal brand champions who can help gain consensus on the brand position.

Employees might feel that participating in brand research is time-consuming, but once they understand that their input will influence the brand experience and ultimately their own experience, they will better appreciate its value. With input from internal audiences, marketers can be confident that the brand's attributes better resonate with its target market and with the organization behind the brand. ■

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