

Strengthen your brand's equity with a brand contact audit

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**What are the impressions
your brand sends to your
customers when they come
in contact with it?**

Article as printed in *Quirk's Marketing
Research Review* Volume XIII, No. 2,
February 1999

"A brand is a living entity in the consumer's mind" we said in an article addressing brand identity in the February, 1998 issue of *Quirk's Marketing Research Review*. Actually brands are like children. We give birth to them, we groom them, we talk about them, we dress them right and we present them to the world.

A small difference: Children become self sufficient after some point in their lives, at least some do! Brands seem to need the undivided attention of brand managers all their lives if they are going to survive in a competitive environment.

Recently I was on a business trip in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. I had reservations at the Holiday Inn, right on the beach. It was dark when I arrived and as I approached the hotel I noticed that the letter "H" was black. The electrical connections were not working so the name of the hotel was HolidayIn". Unusual but I knew what the name was. My first reactions: "Who is minding the store" and "I wonder if they pay as much attention to the inside as they do to the outside!"

At the check-in I was greeted by a very pleasant clerk who was extremely accommodating and the room I was given had a great view but I could not open the window to get the "ocean breeze". Well, I was not spending that much time in my room so I let it go although inside me I felt that little disappointment bug that we feel when something is not going the way we want it. Had this been a vacation trip the importance of an open window would have been on the top of my list of important items but since I was there for only a few hours it did not really matter.

What I realized during my visit was that the contacts I had with the people at this hotel were extremely positive but my contacts with the physical aspects of the operation left me rather disappointed i.e. Signs, windows, parking, elevators. Overall my stay was a positive experience given my circumstances.

This is an example of what Don Schultz, the dean of integrated marketing communications calls Brand Contact Audit. The opportunities a brand has to come in contact with its consumers and the impressions it creates during these contacts.

This notion holds true whether your brand is a hotel, a bank, an airline, a telephone company, or for that matter any service industry or any consumer product that sells through supermarkets, mass merchandisers, drug stores or any other outlet.

Benefits of a brand contact audit

Brand contact audit studies are essential tools for brand managers and can address several key objectives:

1. They can identify strengths and opportunities for operational improvements.
2. They identify opportunities for new product introductions
3. They identify opportunities for communication strategies and can build greater efficiencies in the brand's communications program
4. They profile the brand's personality and provide opportunities for improvements or changes
5. They assess the consistency of the brand's external contacts with consumer expectations and brand personality, and identify opportunities for communications through direct marketing programs or other communications vehicles

Here we will state the obvious: Not all consumers of a given brand are created equal. There are heavy users, light users, high potential-non users, young, old, males, females and you can add to the list every type of segmentation that seems relevant to your particular brand. This matrix of possibilities makes for an interesting challenge when you do a brand audit.

Be sure you cover your most important audiences because you may discover that you have not only different contact points for each one but the prioritization of your contact points may differ from audience to audience. The level of expectations of a budget traveler may be significantly different from that of an investment banker or from that of a tourist and these different expectations will yield different results.

The same will be true when you change distribution channels. Walking into a department store and seeing brand name clothing in piles translates into low price, high volume, low cost service, no return transactions. Neatly stacked merchandise, full service policy, customer oriented sales people translates into first class expectations with customer satisfaction in mind.

Category criteria

It is very important to establish the category criteria consumers use when building the inventory of contact points. The criteria are the reasons why someone buys that category. This information can be obtained by asking several times the question: “What do you look for when shopping for...” And it can be followed with the question: “What is important to you when you shop for...”

The criteria list becomes the screening mechanism that helps evaluate the delivery of the expectations at the various contact points. Not all criteria will be used at every contact point but all will be used at one point or another.

How to conduct a qualitative brand contact audit

During a brand contact audit, the participation of the brand’s management is critical and the researcher must have access to as many individuals including the advertising agency to obtain input. Depending on the objectives of the study, the specific information collected may vary but the administration of the project is similar.

1. Start by creating a list of as many contact points as possible. This list is generated through internal personal interviews conducted with management and agency people. If possible, as a researcher make every effort to use the brand yourself. This is important later on in the process of understanding the nuances that come up by the users. The language used for these contact points should be the language consumers use and not the technical language management may be using.
2. A list of these contact points should be made and printed in a form that is readable in a normal focus group room by all members of the group when you put it up on the wall.
3. Decide on the segments of consumers you will want to utilize for the brand audit i.e. heavy users, light users etc. Recruit verbal and “experienced” consumers. During the session, establish category contact points and eventually the particular brand’s contact points from the consumers’ perspective. The respondents may need to be paced so that they can follow a logical pattern and not wander randomly. There will be a place for random wandering in a minute!
4. Take the respondents through the process for the brand in question and at least one other brand. Preferably a key competitor. This will enhance the gaps that exist in the audit and pinpoint later the need for changes. Develop at this point a contact list that is consumer based. This list is to be posted next to the one generated by management so that the duplicates will be eliminated. The “net” list will be evaluated later during the session.
5. Be sure to explore all the contacts: physical, emotional, behavioral, static, dynamic etc. Pay particular attention to those items that may not come directly in contact with the participants but may be contacts for another individual in the purchase/ usage chain e.g. secretaries, assistants, travel agents, children, wives, husbands etc. Use sounds, images and feelings.
6. Consider the differences in language used by the respondents and the management of the brand. If there are differences explore them. Ask and define the differences. This area may present opportunities for new names that are consumer-based and fitting rather than convoluted acronyms that management folks may tend to use.
7. Use free association exercises to enhance the “linear” list of contact points you have created. You may want to use analogies, picture sorts, metaphors, forced fit exercises or collages to enrich the list.
8. Using an evaluation matrix select the 10 most important contact points (it’s a place to start, later you can explore the rest). The matrix addresses the contact point, consumer’s expectations, the actual experience, the belief created, the importance of the contact in judging the brand and the suggested next steps. The matrices, when completed are discussed by the participants during the session. Later, they are analyzed and the results are summarized and presented to the brand management team with recommendations.
9. The sessions last 2 hours. Focus group settings we have found to be the most productive and efficient way to conduct these brand audits. Quantitative evaluation may be necessary in some cases although in most cases a qualitative study delivers the desirable results.

Building a brand’s equity means minding the details. Minding the tactics is not what a lot of people want to do these days. They would rather concentrate on Strategy which deals with the Big picture. This type of study is about the details that make up the Big picture.

Someone has to mind the details and in my 30 years in the research business I have seen how brand managers sweat the details, build brands slowly and carefully and care about their brands as they do about their children. When you look at brands like Coca Cola, Gillette, Nike, Nordstrom’s, The Ritz Carlton, Levi jeans and other category leaders you can see the meticulous detail they go through to be sure that all points of contact with the consumers are consistent with their expectations, deliver on expectations and lead the way to new expectations..

This process is about knowing what matters to your consumers and delivering it by managing your brand through all the details. Also, it is about helping you to build integrated marketing communications programs that work.