

The 10 Key Questions to Building Your Brand Strategy

Hello there! Thanks for downloading this handy worksheet. Working through these questions will enable you to get clear about your brand message, audience, value and vibe.

Feel free to work through these questions as-is, and then build your messaging and visuals to reflect what you uncover. Or better yet, use this worksheet as a Companion Guide to my book, [Branding Basics for Small Business: How to Create an Irresistible Brand on Any Budget, 2nd Edition](#), which goes into way more detail on each one and gives you juicy case studies and expert insights on everything from design to blogging to social media to content marketing from top experts such as Jay Baer, Ann Handley, Mike Michalowicz, Alexandra Franzen and more.

Here's to your success!



These questions have been adapted from *Branding Basics for Small Business: How to Create an Irresistible Brand on Any Budget, 2nd Edition* by Maria Ross (2014, Norlights Press). All rights reserved.

1. How do you describe your organization and what you do?

This should be just one or two crisp sentences that address these questions: "What do you do? Why does it matter? Who cares?" Don't use any catch phrases or taglines.

Exercise: Write a basic description of what your organization does and who it serves in an easy-to-understand sentence or two, with no marketing hype. Run this by a few people who know nothing about your business and see if they "get" what you do and for whom you do it.

The 10 Key Questions to Building Your Brand Strategy

2. What are the products or services and how are they packaged and priced?

Answer this question in a more detailed way than Q#1 above. Include pricing information as this will eventually contribute to how you represent your brand.

Exercise: In the table below, list each product or service you offer and how much you charge. If you offer packages, note these and write down everything they include. If you are a retail shop or online store with many items, list a representative sample of items and the price ranges for each. For example, a boutique might offer “Casual dresses, ranging from \$200 to \$500; Jewelry, ranging from \$50 to \$400.”

Product or Service	Description / Features	Pricing Details

3. What are the organization's strengths and weaknesses?

Your brand communications should ideally play to your overall strengths and downplay or address your weaknesses, turning them into positives. You should address: "What unique things can your business offer? What compelling assets, skills or connections do you have? Where is your business vulnerable? Where do you fall down against the competition?"

Exercise: In the table below, start listing quick bullet points about you and your business at a high level (not product or by-product) for each column. Got a great location? Dub that a strength. Are you brand new in town and lack a strong community network to promote your business? Make that a weakness. If you're small and your competitors are large, this could be a weakness when it comes to buying power and awareness, but it could be a strength: you might be more flexible when working with clients and offer more personalized service. In that case, you'd list your size under both columns.

STRENGTH	WEAKNESS

4. What are the adjectives and emotions around your brand?

Brainstorm to create a list of all the adjectives, images, or emotions around your brand (the “brand attributes”) that come to mind first, and then go trim the list until you have the five to seven most crucial descriptions. You might want to leverage the brands of people, characters, or locations for your description. As an example, in describing a brand as “Audrey Hepburn”, you would instantly get the picture of grace, femininity, elegance, and beauty without explicitly stating that. What images come to mind when you think of “New York City” as opposed to “New Orleans”?

Exercise: In the space below, make a list of every adjective, emotion, analogy, character, or genre that best describes what you want your organization to represent. Think about what image you want customers to have of you. Try to pare this list down to five to seven strong points that will help focus your efforts without creating an unattainable image for a designer or writer. If your list is too long, keep cutting it in half until you get to the five to seven most important traits and images.

5. Who and where is your ideal audience?

This is the single most important aspect to a strong Brand Strategy. If you don't know your audience intimately and make them real, you'll be shooting at a moving target. In defining your audience, think about your ideal customer, not your average customer. Defining this also helps with your pricing and product/services packaging, and helps you ensure what you offer and the pricing that most appeals to your ideal customer.

Exercise: Use the space below to write a one-page character profile of your ideal customer. Try not to create more than three different profiles for now. Give this person a name, an age, and a marital status. Tell where they work, what they watch on TV, what they do for fun, how much money they make, what a typical day is like for them, how they commute, which groups/associations they belong to, which magazines they read, and anything else that comes to mind. Be as specific and creative as possible. This will help you discover unexpected ways to get your brand in front of the people who matter most.

The 10 Key Questions to Building Your Brand Strategy

6. What are the main customer benefits and why do they matter? Why can you make those claims?

If you don't have a good handle on how to verbalize the benefits you provide, you won't be able to build a brand that resonates both consciously and subconsciously with customers. The lack of benefits will leave all your marketing messages flat. The answers to this step form the basis of a full-blown messaging platform and help you create your elevator pitch.

Exercise: Compose a list of three to five main benefits your business provides, from a customer's point of view. Think about what customers ultimately gain by using your products or services. Do your products/services increase their profits, lower their costs, or improve their efficiency? Do you increase their profits, lower their costs, make them more beautiful, boost self-confidence, preserve precious memories, or reduce stress? For each main benefit, create a bulleted list of three proof points that show why you can make that claim. Try to be concise with your language — don't ramble on for multiple sentences about each benefit.

BENEFIT	PROOF POINTS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •

7. Who is your competition and how are you different?

Creating a snapshot of your competition and the reasons people might buy from them is always a smart move. This way, your brand promise and messaging can clearly address how you're different and why customers should come to you instead. Branding is all about differentiating your business from the other options customers have. Knowing what you're up against will help you craft messaging that speaks directly to this issue and enables you to clearly and concisely say why you're the best alternative or the best use of budget dollars.

Exercise: Create a list of your competitors, including direct competition and indirect competition. That is, if you own a florist shop, other florists are obviously your direct competition. But for Valentine's Day your indirect competition might also include jewelry stores and chocolate shops. For each competitor, list bullet points of what they provide. Be brief. Then, list why your business is a better alternative, and how the services/products you offer are different. For this exercise, we can start to look back on the other questions we've answered so far, such as benefits and strengths. You may find those items are also differentiators for you to tout, vis-à-vis your competition. Knowing how to clearly position yourself against your competitors will help you craft messaging and create a visual brand identity that separates you from the pack.

8. How do you need to communicate with customers and prospects?

Branding is about two-way communication with your customers. If you have no way to talk to them, and more importantly, listen to them, your brand will never grab their loyalty. Go back to your ideal audience profile and compare notes. How should you be communicating with them? Where are they, what information do they need, and which communication vehicles do they prefer? Which communication avenues will they actually pay attention to?

Exercise: Create two columns and list all communication vehicles to existing customers on one side, and all vehicles to new prospects on the other. Consider things like ads, website copy, flyers, newsletters, events, and the like. See if there's 100% overlap — this may mean you're lumping current customers and prospects together instead of communicating relevant messages to each group. Compare this list against your ideal customer profile to ensure these communication vehicles are the best ways to reach your customers and prospects, or to help you determine if you need an alternative plan.

COMMUNICATION VEHICLES FOR EXISTING CUSTOMERS	COMMUNICATION VEHICLES FOR NEW PROSPECTS

9. What is your organization's one greatest asset?

What is the one thing that sets your business apart from others? Go back to your strengths and weaknesses, or your competitive differentiators to find the one thing that uniquely defines your business above all others. If you can't boil your single greatest asset down to one thing that no other business can claim, you need to put more thought into your positioning, your product/services mix, or the audience you serve.

Exercise: Review your strengths, competitive differentiators, and your customer benefits from the previous questions. Write down the *single greatest asset* of your business. What is the top item that will put your offerings in a unique market position? What is the one claim no one else can make in your market space? What unique asset benefits your customers the most and helps you stand out?

The 10 Key Questions to Building Your Brand Strategy

10. How do you measure success?

The steps to a sale are often called “the sales and marketing cycle.” Marketers will often call these phases: Awareness, Education, Consideration or Evaluation, and Purchase. Effective branding and messaging at each phase can help move your customers to the Purchase phase faster.

Exercise: Come up with five to ten metrics you will measure to ensure your Brand Strategy, and ultimately your marketing plan, is working effectively. Remember, these can be quantitative or qualitative. It’s actually a good idea to use some of both, so you should record important anecdotal or general feedback you receive. Make your metrics realistic but time-based if you can, such as “twenty new newsletter signups each month” or “fifty attendees to each monthly event.” You can have one of the metrics be a sales number if you like, such as “generate \$2 million in revenue this quarter,” but keep that as your ultimate objective — the one to which all your branding and marketing activities, with their individual goals, will lead. Try to keep your brand goals more aligned to increasing visibility, awareness or visits. For each customer, knowing about you and understanding what you offer is the first step required for an eventual purchase.

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Putting It All Together

At this point, you should have ten answers for the questions above. You may need to go back and forth between some of these to revise your answers to earlier questions as you discover more about what your business is and what it offers. For example, you may find your prices don't align with your ideal customer target, so you'll need to go back and tweak this.

The Brand Strategy is a dynamic document that lives and breathes. It will refresh over time as you learn more about your customers, as your market changes, or as you adapt your offerings. It will **form the foundation** for all your other marketing and even operational decisions.

It works from the bottom up. You can't decide on room décor and paint until you have a strong foundation upon which to build the house in the first place.



For more strategies to ignite your brand (and delight your mind), plus exclusive offers, events and insights, please visit Maria at www.red-slice.com, follow her on Twitter @redslice or join our Facebook collective at www.facebook.com/redslice