

Marketing News

Interviews and chats inform strategy and build a more engaged team

Are your marketing communications connecting as effectively as they might with customers and prospects? Are they getting the results you want? Does your brand mean “out there” what you need it to mean? Qualitative research—chats over a cup of coffee—can help.

By Eric Norman and Roger Sametz

Our world and your markets are never static. And for any number of reasons you might have to change how you're positioned vis-à-vis your competitors—and how you communicate to the people whose interest and engagement are critical to your success. Your place in the competitive landscape might be changing due to new players or new customer expectations. Or you've evolved, but your communications haven't—so perceptions lag. You may need a new brand strategy to accommodate a new line of business or build new meaning in your logo.

But before you make any changes to your branding and communications, you need to know where you are, where you want to go, and how you might get there.

Making smart decisions requires a mix of information: a clear understanding of your offerings' value; analysis of your competitive position; and insights into your constituents' needs, motivations and decisions.

Qualitative research, especially interviews and loosely structured chats, can help you better understand who you are, who you might be, what might impede progress, and what resonates with your target constituencies. And help you build a more engaged staff.

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A couple dozen conversations can shed light on your target constituents' beliefs, concerns and attitudes. They can help you spot misperceptions on either side of the equation. Conversations help you get into people's hearts and minds, to understand their decisions and values. Suppose you already have quantitative data on decisions: What motivated them? How did your brand meaning influence outcomes? Informal, neutral, and thoughtfully guided conversations will reveal to you the whys behind the whats.

Your conversations should be carefully planned, ultimately, even though they might feel informal.

What do you want to learn? Structure questions knowing that you will need to analyze what you hear; it's not likely someone will simply utter a break

through marketing strategy. Focus on a few key issues. Probe for goals and meaning rather than tactics: How do you describe your enterprise? What's its value? Who do you need to engage? What do they care about? What's in the way of realizing success? Ask a few common questions of everyone to help you set the levels, but remain flexible so you can go where your partners in conversation lead you. Be prepared to listen, dig deeper, and evolve your inquiry over the course of your investigation.

Who you talk to is important.

Include not only representatives of market segments but also outside experts: press and industry analysts. Also involve people within your organization: executives, board members, people who are close to your customers and who know a lot—if only anyone would ever ask them. Your conversations can be one-on-one or in small groups, which often generate useful dialogue. Hold conversations in a neutral, safe context; encourage frank, creative exchange. An outside consultant, well-briefed on the organization's goals, problems and culture, is often helpful. Avoid having someone's boss in the room.

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The best way to analyze what you learn is to soak in it.

Assuming you have been involved in all the conversations, you will begin to see patterns. Where are the areas of strong agreement?

Of strong disagreement? Does opportunity or danger lie in the gray areas? What findings point to urgent action? Remember, you set out to learn intangible things; it might not be clear what the right answer is and there might be many right answers. Consider starting and ending with chats with the CEO and a core client team: first to elicit information, then to test your findings and early recommendations.

Of course, informal chats are but one form of qualitative research. You will also be well-served by intelligence from a communications audit, a review of the competitive and relevant landscape, a review of the focus groups. Each method can help you discover opportunities and round out your plan.

Qualitative research pays dividends in several ways:

+ Comments and ideas directly from your clients and customers will help you define strategy based on insights and needs—on what people really want and value—in addition to product or service features. Working with a large property management firm, we discovered that prospects didn't much care about how well the lawn was mowed; rather, the residents wanted to feel like "they were home" —which suggested a re-prioritization of services and a different sales pitch. While collaborating with a large contract

research organization, we learned early on that they were communicating their offerings boxed by department, not crafting stories and solutions that matched what kept clients up at night—integrated offerings that they could offer, but weren't.

+ Engaging your colleagues makes them part of the solution and further invests them in the success of the organization. You'll bridge silos and you might discover obstacles to success. For example, while working with a biomedical research institute, it became clear that their most influential brand ambassadors, their scientists, wouldn't identify themselves as members of the organization—a major branding impediment. And people we always find that people within a company know a lot about their customers: What questions do customers ask often? What's tough to answer?

+ Your creative teams—the people who design products, services, and communications—get better briefs and stronger intelligence. You can equip them with substantive, nuanced information that opens doors to innovative solutions. Conversations with students and alumnae (ranging in age from 12 to mid-70s) from an independent girls' school helped us identify resonant themes that connected these generations of women, influencing Web design, admissions, and development communications, and the kinds of conversations trustees had in the boardroom.

Qualitative research is an inexpensive and often overlooked way to learn what you need to make informed decisions and take calculated risks. And through the very process of asking, talking and listening, you can move people, externally and internally, closer to your organization, building stronger relationships and generating goodwill.

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About Sametz Blackstone Associates

Sametz Blackstone Associates is a brand-focused strategic communications practice that integrates strategy, message development, design, and technology to create compelling communication programs that help evolving organizations better navigate change.

Clients include academic and research institutions, life-science organizations, professional service firms, businesses, cultural organizations and other non-profits, and government agencies.

Founded in 1979, Sametz Blackstone has always approached communication and design as important tools to help organizations realize both their strategic and tactical goals.

The firm has years of experience helping organizations, both startups and centenarians, define and articulate their vision and value, and increase connection to key constituents. Sametz Blackstone helps clients build or re-energize brands, enter new markets or geographies, promote offerings, increase participation, generate earned and un-earned income, recruit and retain talent, and add value to the enterprise—over the short and long term.

Located in Boston's historic South End in a 150-year-old brownstone, Sametz Blackstone works with clients both around the corner and around the world.

Sametz Blackstone Associates

Compelling communications—integrating brand-focused strategy, design, and technology to help evolving organizations navigate change

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