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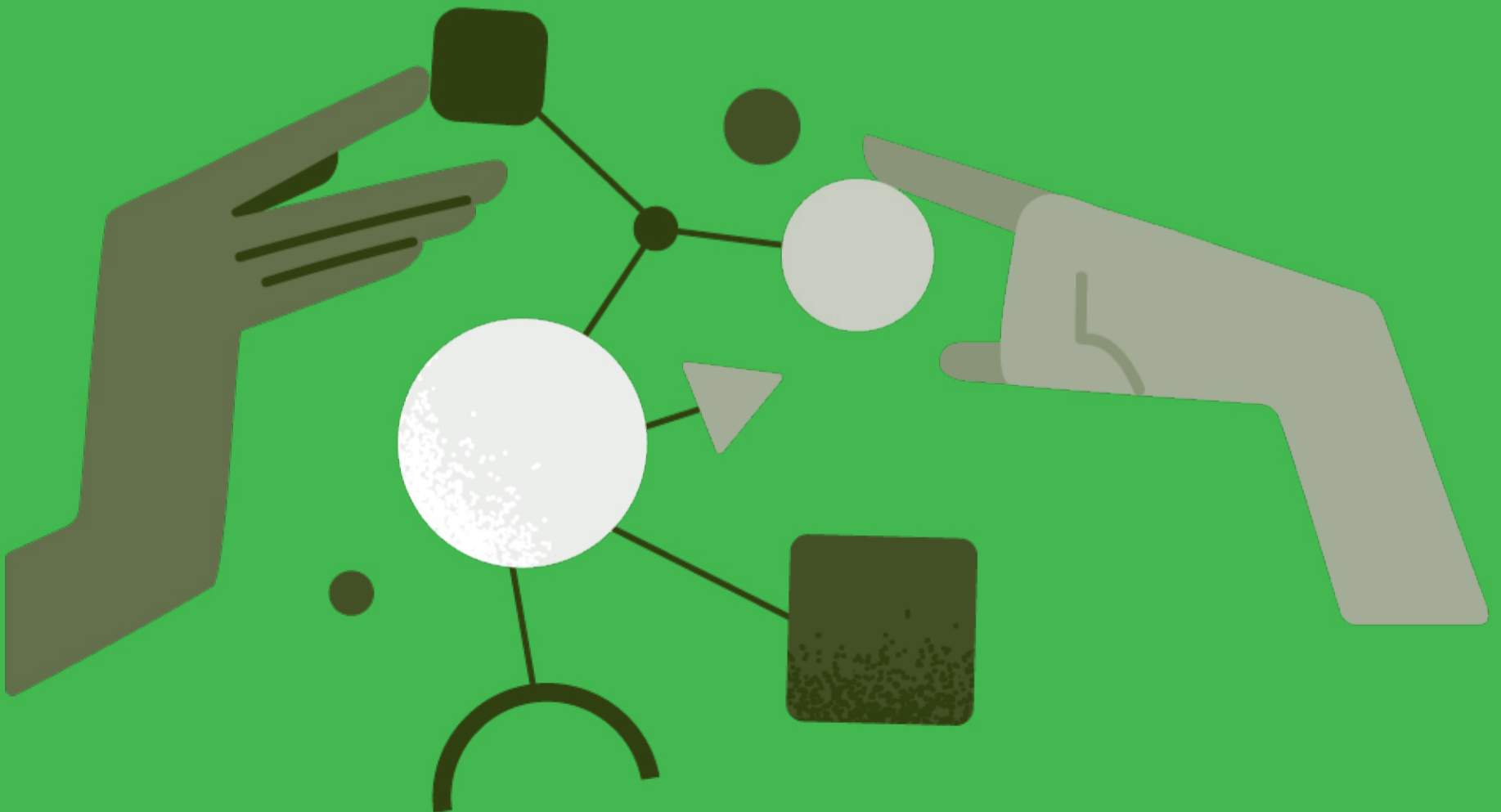
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Nick Mowbray of ZURU

Branding.

Branding Research: How to Do It and What Business Leaders Believe About Using It

By Clay Ostrom



Branding Research: How to Do It and What Business Leaders Believe About Using It

When we see a strong, memorable brand out in the wild, we see the finished product. We have the luxury of consuming the messaging, design, and value proposition without considering the work that went into developing them.

This makes the process of building a brand appear dangerously simple.

It's a bit like seeing the solution to a puzzle before attempting to solve it. It sparks confidence that surely you could have arrived at the same result. In retrospect, it's obvious, right?

So when it comes time for business leaders to develop their own brand, that overconfidence can push them to try and jump straight to a solution. They try to pluck the perfect message, position, or design out of thin air... or maybe through a quick brainstorming session.

Unfortunately, your brand's puzzle doesn't come with a magical answer key. Instead, there's just a big list of questions:

- Who are your ideal customers?
- What do those customers value in a solution?
- When do they need a solution like this?
- Why are they motivated to buy?
- How does your brand fit in the market?

To tackle this puzzle, you need a structured approach. You need to understand how your brand's purpose, positioning, and messaging fit together.

And you also need fuel to inform that strategy.

This is where branding research comes in.

Branding research provides a deep understanding of your customers and market through data and insights. Research helps you understand how your customers think and why they buy. It also helps you understand the market and where you fit into it.

These are the necessary ingredients to make your own strong, memorable brand.

Map & Fire conducted a survey on how business leaders use research to guide their brands and found that 84% of the business leaders we polled had done some kind of research in the past 12 months.

What were the top three benefits of research for their businesses?

1. Provided new insights they didn't previously have (40%)
2. Increased confidence in their direction (39%)
3. Directly informed their strategy (38%)

That's what it's all about: creating clarity around your brand strategy to improve growth.

Here's how to apply it to your brand.

The Main Types of Branding Research

For the business leaders in our survey, the two types of branding research most utilized were:

- Interviews (55%)
- Surveys (51%)

This aligns with how Map & Fire operates as well—we view surveys and interviews as the best one-two combination to gain valuable data.



Customer Interviews

The key strength of the interview format is that it provides a way to dig deep into the experiences and beliefs of customers. Interviews also provide a layer of data around the language and emotions people use when discussing their challenges and motivations.

This information doesn't come through in a survey.

The weaknesses are that interviews can be time-consuming to organize and conduct. Also, a limited number of participants can make it easy to put too much weight on individual responses. Starting with at least five interviews helps ensure some healthy diversity around responses.

In Map & Fire's work, we focus on structured customer interviews. This involves developing a strategic set of questions to uncover the most relevant information for the brand. Using a structured, consistent format makes it possible to uncover trends across interviews.

Some brands also use unstructured interviews as an informal way to collect feedback. However, the lack of consistency leads to scattered results, which makes it difficult to draw useful conclusions.



Customer Surveys

Surveys provide a different yet complementary type of customer data. While interviews allow a brand to go deep and uncover qualitative nuances with customers, surveys allow the brand to explore wider, quantitative trends.

The key strength of the survey format is that it allows a brand to gather large amounts of structured data in a short amount of time. While the time to conduct interviews increases with the number of participants, a survey can go out to hundreds or thousands of people at once.

Leveraging that volume of responses allows a brand to see customer trends more accurately.

The main weakness is that the format of the questions constrains responses. Predefined survey questions don't provide the flexibility to dig deeper into a specific response like you might in an interview.

There are also best-practice limitations around survey length. Surveys are generally kept short to encourage participation and maintain thoughtful responses. General guidelines are to stick to a length of around 10 minutes or less to complete and fewer than 15–25 questions.

Focus Groups

Another type of branding research represented in the survey we ran was focus groups. About 25% of business leaders said they had used focus groups in the past 12 months.

Focus groups typically function with a single moderator who leads a small group of around 6–12 participants through a series of questions. While this can be an efficient way to get qualitative feedback, the focus group format has a few inherent challenges.

Because the group consists of strangers, strong personalities tend to dominate the room. People who are naturally reserved may not be as open about their thoughts and feelings in a group setting.

There's also a danger of "group think": Ideas get presented in the moment that shape people's opinions or create subconscious pressure to go along with the majority.

These factors can all impact the usefulness and validity of the data that's collected.

Market and Competitive Research

Another key form of branding research examines the competitive landscape. This is a critical step in any brand strategy process as it allows you to consider who your competitors are and how your brand compares to them. Comparing and contrasting with the competition provides the data you need to craft a strong position for your brand.

Again, like interviews and surveys, the key to effective market research is to have structure around how you analyze the data. Without a consistent format, it's nearly impossible to extract meaningful trends.

How to Conduct Branding Research

In our survey of business leaders, we asked how they conducted their branding research over the last 12 months:

- In-house (33%)
- Outside agency (26%)
- Both (21%)

In other words, either the brand conducted research itself, hired a team to help, or did some combination of the two.

Again, there are strengths and weaknesses with each approach.

In-house Research

If a brand has people in-house with experience conducting research, this can be a great way to collect data and insights on a regular basis. There's also an inherent level of knowledge about the brand and the market they're in that can help focus the research on areas that are the most valuable.

However, living and breathing a business every day creates inherent biases for team members. Even when trying to stay objective, past experiences are bound to influence people's thinking.

If your business is smaller, it's also less likely you'll have someone on staff who has extensive experience conducting research. This may make the work less effective, even if the intentions are in the right place.



Agency Research

If you don't have resources in-house, hiring an agency can be a great way to access branding research insights. An outside agency can bring a level of experience and structure to the work that only comes through repetition. This helps ensure both efficiency and accuracy in the work.

There's also value in using resources with an objective, outside perspective. They don't have the baggage of internal pressures or established beliefs—their goal is strictly to gather accurate results.

The most obvious challenges of bringing in an agency are cost and time. But when leaders understand how this work impacts the brand's long-term success and growth, it's easy to justify that investment.

In our survey, we asked business leaders which factors most prevent them from using customer research: cost, time, and expertise. For the business leaders who understood their customers the best, the most common response (43%) was "Nothing—we use research whenever it's necessary."

Getting Started With Your Branding Research

Successful business leaders understand the value of research. In our survey, 74% said that research was either *Extremely* or *Very Valuable* in aligning their brand with the needs and beliefs of their customers.

Research also doesn't have to be a massive time commitment. 67% said they would expect to complete a research engagement of a survey and interviews in less than one month. Compared to the potential of facing years of misalignment and limited growth, a few weeks is definitely a worthwhile investment.

By taking the time to conduct branding research, you'll have the data and insights to deeply understand your brand's strategic puzzle pieces. That's the recipe for building a strong brand that customers remember.



Author: Clay Ostrom is a brand strategist and the owner of the branding agency Map & Fire in Los Angeles. They specialize in working with founders and business leaders to create high-growth brands through positioning, messaging, and customer research. Learn more about their work and access their free Brand Field Guide at mapandfire.com.