

The 10 Best Strategies to Differentiate Your Brand



by Evelyn Starr

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You are so close to the sale that you can visualize the signature on the contract.

Chummy with the prospect, your smiles and laughter fill the air. You enjoy each other's company. You have moved past small talk of sports teams and your children's pursuits, and discussed doing business together.

You are about to confirm the order when they ask "So what makes your brand different? Why should I buy from you?"

Ugh.

Your throat clenches. Your mind races through the three or four responses you usually give.

What can you say to seal the deal so that your prospect doesn't even consider your competition?

Your Brand Holds the Answer

If you have done your brand strategy right, you don't need to search your mind. The answer is there because you have built a meaningfully differentiated brand.

Yet few businesses have done the hard work of getting their brand strategy right and offering something truly different.

Why?

Because building a differentiated brand requires committing to one or more strategies that focus the brand and executing those strategies every day.

The hard work isn't as hard as it seems. And it makes it easy to answer the prospect's question, get the sale and grow your business.

Here are the 10 best strategies to differentiate your brand.

#1 Focus on a Niche

Focusing on a niche helps you build a strong reputation and become the go-to brand for your audience.

Business owners shy away from niches though for fear that they will limit the brand's potential. This is not true. First because brands that succeed have become known for something and niches speed that process.

Second, niches work in your favor because developing a specialty creates a halo of competence around your brand, giving it credibility to expand later.

Third, niches position your brand well to generate repeat business. Going deep in a niche often allows you to develop companion or additional offerings useful to the same audience. Repeat business is much cheaper than having to find new customers.

Niches can be:

- Unique solutions to specific problems or conditions.
 - o Airbnb solves travelers' desire to feel like they belong when away from home.
 - o Spanx addresses "wardrobe woes," helping women look polished.
- Well-defined target audiences such as specific industries or groups of people.
 - o Gemfind specializes in websites and digital strategy for jewelers.
 - o Underarmour serves the "scrappy outsider" athlete, the one who patiently looks on during the first few rounds of the draft pick and works harder than the rest to prove valuable to the team.
- Attitudinal.
 - o [Life is Good spreads optimism.](#)

- Patagonia attracts people who have "a love of wild and beautiful places" and who want to "implement solutions to the environmental crisis."
- Geographical.
 - California Raisins benefit from the state's reputation as a sunny environment.
 - Canadian Maple Syrup has a quality reputation buoyed by the country's maple leaf symbol and its dominant production.
- Product-based, if the product is highly specialized.
 - Swiss Army Knives remain the authentic multipurpose tool that many military users and campers seek.
 - Rolex is synonymous with luxury watches.
- Economic. (Though I am not a fan of this angle.)
 - Neiman Marcus appeals to high-end shoppers.
 - Wal-Mart is positioned as the retailer that helps you save money.

#2 Create a New Category

If your brand solves a problem that no one else does, you get to define a new category and own it. At least initially. Category creation can pay off big-time if managed well.



Think Fedex in the first several years of overnight delivery service.

And right now, Spanx. Founder Sara Blakely could not find an undergarment that created a smooth look under the white pants she wanted to wear to a party. In a pinch she cut off the feet to a pair of control top pantyhose and wore those. She got a patent for her innovation.

Soon after the Spanx brand was born and now dominates the market for "solving wardrobe woes."

SPANX[®]
BY SARA BLAKELY

#3 Create a Subcategory

Long-time brand guru David Aaker labeled the term subcategory for the space that a brand comes to own within an existing category that distinguishes it from the competition. Subcategories emerge when your brand bucks convention and focuses on different elements than the rest of the competition.

Opportunities for subcategories exist in areas where your customers remain frustrated or have unmet needs. These areas may not be immediately obvious.

Brands often think about adding features and benefits, but sometimes there is space for a simpler offering that is easier to deliver and less expensive to produce.

Watch maker Swatch forged new territory when it focused on self-expression instead of the category standard at the time, precision. No other watch brand tapped this angle in this price range at the time and Swatch came to own the affordable self-expressive time piece space.

swatch® 

Chobani Greek yogurt introduced the thicker, creamier Greek style of yogurt to consumers and continues to lead this subcategory.



#4 Innovate.

Innovations can change the rules of the game for your industry and take your brand in new directions. It can befuddle competitors too. And who doesn't love pushing competitors off-kilter?

In 1969 a Japanese company called Busicom commissioned Intel (then only a year old) to create 12 chips for its calculator and wanted to pay \$50 each. Intel engineers figured they would cost \$300 each.

Intel's engineer Ted Hoff designed a system that would work with 4 chips instead. Realizing the power of what they had created, Intel bought back the rights to the microprocessor chips. Microprocessors became Intel's primary business once personal computers took off in the 1980s.

NETFLIX

Netflix set out to solve consumers' problem of being beholden to television schedules. Their first innovation was to mail DVDs to consumers' homes, eliminating the trip to the video store and giving them control over the time that they chose to watch.

As internet usage became ubiquitous they innovated again to deliver their content via streaming online, making access to on-demand entertainment even easier.

Blockbuster Video was more than befuddled by Netflix. They got caught looking and went bankrupt.

And now that [Netflix has innovated a third time](#) to create its own content, HBO is on high alert.

#5 Rewrite the experience.

Instead of changing your product, change the experience. But change it in a way that is meaningful and valuable to your target market. Outstanding and unusual customer experiences prompt word-of-mouth referrals and positive reviews.

Zappos redefined the online shopping experience with free shipping both ways and their relentlessly helpful and patient customer service.



Warby Parker focused on increasing access to eye glasses for everyone, by selling them online, making stylish ones less expensive and donating a free pair for every one sold to those in need who can't afford them. They also allow free trial of five pairs in your home so you aren't guessing how they will look or wasting money on eye glasses you don't like.



Michael Dubin channeled his frustration buying razors, which were expensive and "locked in a plastic fortress" at the drugstore, into founding Dollar Shave Club which allows men to bypass the drugstore and pay less if they don't want the latest shave technology. [And he was funny in the process.](#)

#6 Remove a customer barrier.

Take a hard look at your industry's typical operating procedures and identify points in the process where prospects or existing customers hesitate.

If you reduce the risk in the prospect's eyes, then you will set your brand apart in a way that is highly attractive to your target market.



L.L. Bean did this decades ago with their famous return-anything-anytime policy. In their customers' eyes, there was now no risk of being stuck with something that did not work or that they didn't like.

In 2013 TMobile took the daring step of offering cell phone service without requiring a contract. That got the attention of contract weary consumers.

Many colleges have used this route by becoming test optional - giving student applicants the choice to submit their SAT/ACT scores or not. The number of schools removing this customer barrier is up to 925 at this writing and growing. It includes Bowdoin College, Trinity College, Skidmore College and Wake Forest University.



7 Solve a world problem.

Beyond sounding wildly idealistic, this idea appeals to all consumers and especially millennials. A business that can make a profit but also address a social problem has a great brand story to tell and differentiates the brand in a way that is difficult to replicate.

The problem does not have to be calamitous to have an effect. We already talked about Warby Parker's goals of making eye glasses more accessible and of donating one pair for every pair sold.

Blake Mycoskie has taken that concept even further. He was traveling in Argentina in 2006 when he discovered that children there faced hardships because they had no shoes. Blake hatched the idea of a "One for One" program where his company TOMS would donate a pair of shoes for each one sold.



His travels continued to reveal more worldwide needs, so he expanded the idea of social responsibility without dependence on donations. In addition to providing shoes for the shoeless, TOMS helps restore sight (eye exam and treatment, from glasses to surgery if needed), provide safe drinking water, and support safe births worldwide.

Ben & Jerry's and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters purchase Fair Trade ingredients.



Adidas has a line of shoes made mostly of recycled ocean plastic. Timberland is launching a line of backpacks, shirts and shoes made from recycled trash from Haiti.

Like the other meaningful differentiators, this strategy is baked into the brand. It is not a once-a-year charitable donation.

#8 Offer a brand experience

Maybe your product or business model isn't out to solve a world problem, but you might be able to influence your customers' world by providing a memorable brand experience.

Brand experiences offer you the opportunity to immerse your customer in your brand in an unhurried manner. The best brand experiences combine entertainment, education and inspiration.



A brand experience could be as elaborate as a brick and mortar entertainment destinations like [Hershey's Chocolate World](#) and Disney World.

Or it could be as simple as the way you package your product, like Birchbox, a service that delivers elegant boxes of beauty products each month.

Events that occur annually like the Life is Good music festival and the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade qualify too.

Even one-off experiences count. Zappos has a history of "Delivering Happiness" on the busiest travel day of the year – the day before Thanksgiving. One year it funded the tolls for Boston-area residents leaving the city on that day. Another year it turned Houston's George Bush International Airport baggage carousels into a game of Wheel of Fortune, awarding prizes based on where the recipient's luggage appeared.



Your goal is to provide a valuable experience to your target market and to connect with them emotionally while being true to the tenets of your brand.

#9 Own a timeless idea.

Brands that personify an appealing idea not only differentiate themselves but they also build strong emotional connections with their target audience. A timeless idea can be a meaningful attribute or a mindset.

Often the idea is not present at the brand's inception, but arises as the brand grows and evolves.

The Life is Good brand began as an effort for founders Bert and John Jacobs to share their art. Over time they found their customers connected to the optimism in their simple message and that became the centerpiece of the brand.



Volvo means safety to many.
Netflix is synonymous with on-demand entertainment.

Disney embodies magic. You can see their efforts to maintain and extend their association with this idea even decades after Walt Disney set it in motion. It is present in the experiences they try to create in Disney theme parks, Disney movies, and all other forms of entertainment under their umbrella.



#10 Tell unique and meaningful stories.

Stories that are unique and meaningful are ones your target audience can relate to and that resonate. They portray people who were grappling with the key problem the brand solves and show how the brand helped them.

If your brand began as a response to an unmet need, tell that story and feature your founder, like Sara Blakely of Spanx or Blake Mycoskie of TOMS.

Good brand stories convey the values of the brand and feature real people. If a key tenet of your brand involves customer service that goes above and beyond the expected, tell stories of employees who did that.



NORDSTROM

Nordstrom excels in this area. Their flagship story is of the employee who accepted tires for return though the retailer did not sell tires.

But Nordstrom has new stories every year of an employee who embodies the brand's customer service ethos, like the housekeeping staffer in a Connecticut store who found a customer's bags along with his receipt and flight itinerary and then tracked him down at John F. Kennedy Airport to let him know she had found the bags.

Think of this approach as themed stories. Stories make conveying your key brand attributes easier and more memorable, increasing your ability to positively influence your brand image.

This strategy complements any of the other nine and is often used in tandem.

Choosing Your Strategies

Did you notice that some brands were mentioned multiple times? For example, the Spanx brand appeared under focus on a niche, create a new category and tell unique and meaningful stories.

That was by design. The strongest brands combine strategies.

I'm not saying you need to do all ten. I don't recommend that.

But two or three of these strategies, consistently and relentlessly executed pack a wallop. Smartly combined strategies differentiate your brand in a way that is memorable to your audience and tough for your competitors to replicate or attack.

Which brand strategies should you choose?

If your brand has existed for at least a few years, chances are that it has already come to mean different things to different audiences. Ask members of each constituency what the brand means to them, what they like most about it, when they seek it out. Ask management, employees, customers, vendors and any other partners.

When you put the results of this research together, patterns should emerge. Those patterns will help you choose the best differentiation strategies for your brand.

Your Brand Gets You the Sale and Builds Your Business

So, there you are, getting ready to shake on the deal, when your prospect pops the questions you dread.

"What makes your brand different? Why should I buy from you?"

But instead of grunting internally and toggling through your mind to find the right answer, you smile.

I'm glad you asked, you respond.

And you proceed to tell the client what makes your brand different. You talk with ease and enthusiasm about your niche or your innovation or your brand experience.

You tell a compelling brand story or two.

Your prospect listens with interest. Your response seals the deal and makes the prospect glad to become a customer.

You relish the question you used to dread because it has become an opportunity for you to set your brand apart with the strategies you execute every day.

It's easy and it works.

What to Do Next

If you are not already experiencing the ease of answering the "What makes your brand different" question or your brand is not an industry standout, you can start toward those goals right now.

You can begin the research I mentioned in the Choosing Your Strategies section.

You can read more about brand strategy in [these entertaining past posts](#).

You can [subscribe to my Varsity Marketing Newsletter](#) to get new posts hot off the press every month.

I can also help you choose the best strategies for your brand. Check out my consulting services [here](#).

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Get in touch today by [emailing me](#) or calling me at 508.655.3193.

I look forward to hearing from you!

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