



Brand Differentiation Check-Up

Brand Differentiation Check-Up: A 6-Week Field Guide

Every brand claims to be different. But few can prove it, and even fewer can articulate how that difference actually drives decisions.

This self-directed check-up is designed to help you assess whether your brand's positioning still holds up under real-world conditions. It's built for founders, CEOs, heads of brand, and anyone responsible for translating value into traction.

You don't need to have read the accompanying case study on Airbnb vs. Vrbo to begin, but if you're wrestling with how to position a brand in a crowded market, or how two similar companies can thrive by standing apart, it might be worth a look. The insights there may help prime your thinking before diving into this audit.

This isn't a branding exercise in the traditional sense. It's a strategic practice: part pattern recognition, part reality check. Over six weeks, you'll examine what you *think* sets you apart, compare that to what your market actually values, and uncover which differentiators are still sharp, and which may need to evolve.

Bring your backbone and an open mind. What comes out of this process should be applied across operations, hiring, training, and marketing. It's not about telling a better story. It's about building a clearer one.

We offer this guide to help you spot, shape, and sharpen your differentiation(s). In the end, your customers just want a solution that makes sense, enough information to decide, and the confidence to move forward.

Start Here: Defining the Core Concepts Behind Differentiation

The self-directed assessment that follows is a strategic audit. To complete it with accuracy and insight, you'll need a technical grasp of what assets like brand positioning and differentiators really are, how they function, and why they matter in a live market context.

What follows is a focused glossary, not to define buzzwords, but to really ground and round out the core concepts this audit depends on.

Brand Position

Your brand position is the distinct, strategic territory your brand occupies in the market and in the mind of your customer. It articulates a set of deliberate choices that align your company's capabilities with specific market needs and timing. It clarifies what you stand for, why your solution is credible, and what type of buyer you're built to serve.



Your brand position should answer five fundamental questions:

- What differentiator(s) do we alone own in the marketplace?
- How do we deliver our differentiation(s)?
- Why are we in business, why do we differentiate as we do?
- Who are we in business to support? Do they value our differentiation(s)?
- When does it matter? When do people engage us? Is it for our differentiation(s)?

Your brand position drives pricing power, competitive separation, and internal alignment across teams. Without it, everything from sales to strategy slows down.

Brand Differentiators

Differentiators are the specific, observable traits, tactics, or capabilities that set your brand apart from others in your category. They are how your position comes to life—functionally, emotionally, and experientially.

Must be:

- *Relevant* to what your market values
- Embedded across operations, hiring, training, and day-to-day decisions
- Distinct enough to elevate your brand as the preferred choice in your category

Differentiators might include product features, speed to service, unique delivery models, proprietary processes, cultural alignment, tech, or perspective. They aren't generic selling points. They're the levers that justify why a buyer opts to support you, stays with you, and advocates for you.

Differentiators should evolve in response to shifting markets, competitor behavior, and customer needs, but they should never drift from your core positioning.

Brand Differentiation Check-Up

A 6-Week Field Guide for Sharpening Your Edge

This is not a branding exercise. It's a strategy session and a business check-up. Differentiation drives decisions. When it's off, everything slows: sales cycles, confidence. When it's sharp and true, your value becomes compelling.

Use this 6-week check-up to assess whether you're positioning still holds a place in the market and if your customers still feel it.

Take a few minutes to read through the full phase by phase field guide before getting started. Seeing the full arc will help you work with more clarity and intention.



Phase 1:

1.1 Define What You Think Sets You Apart

Start internally.

Clarify the differentiators you believe define your brand today.

1.2 List each one. Then answer:

Is this Functional? *(What we offer, concretely and consistently)*

- Does it solve a specific problem or fulfill a defined need?
- Is it a feature, process, or capability that others don't offer or don't execute as well?
- Can we back it up with tangible proof (e.g., outcomes, speed, pricing, IP, convenience)?

Is this Persuasive? *(Does it drive preference and influence decision-making?)*

- Does it directly address the factors customers prioritize when choosing?
- Is it a meaningful reason someone would switch, stay, or refer?
- Have customers confirmed it mattered in their buying decision (through reviews, interviews, or closed-won feedback)?

Is this Experiential? *(Differentiator is embedded throughout organization, start to finish?)*

- Is this differentiator part of how we train, onboard, and align our team across roles and departments?
- Is it consistently reflected in our customer relationships, from marketing to service delivery to follow-up?
- Is this the thing we're known for in our niche and out?

1.3 Next, pressure-test internally:

- Can your sales team explain the differentiator(s) clearly?
- Do you see the differentiator(s) embedded across the organization?

Don't polish the list. Be honest about what's still real, what's dated, and what's assumed.

Phase 2:

2.1 Over the next two weeks, step outside your comfort. Call on a cross-section of your audience:

- Loyalists



- New clients
- Customers who left
- Prospects who didn't choose you

2.2 Identify your targets.

Now invite via email, text, or call up to 12 people to have genuine conversations. This is not a pitch. It's not a focus group. It's listening, plain and simple. Don't persuade. Don't defend. Just ask and receive what they give. (See addendum for email templates)

These questions are smart starting points, but they're not scripts. Adjust them to suit your tone, your industry, and the natural rhythm of conversation with your customers. Don't get too technical or formal. This is about how your differentiators show up in real life and whether your unique value still matters to the people you serve. **Avoid surveys. Have conversations.**

Ask real questions:

Start with:

- What made you choose us?
- What made you stay—or leave?
- What made the decision easy or hard?
- What were you comparing us to?
- What do we get right? What could use more support?

Then move deeper:

- Where is your focus heading in the next year or two? What's becoming more important?
- Where do you see your business moving—and how can we stay valuable as you evolve?
- What are you hoping a partner like us can offer, solve, or stand for in the future?
- Which of our differences truly matter to you—and which ones feel less essential now?

2.3. Show Up With the Right Mindset

- **Block Time and Be Unhurried:** Set aside 45 minutes per conversation. Clear your distractions. You're not conducting a survey, you're inviting a story.
- **Lead With Curiosity:** Don't guide, persuade, or defend. Let customers take the lead. Be open to the unexpected.
- **Look for Patterns:** Think like a codebreaker. As you review what people say, pay attention to words, phrases, or ideas that come up consistently. Group similar answers together, even if they're not worded exactly the same. Don't worry if anyone's perception is right or wrong, what matters is what's being repeated. Look for themes, common feelings, and points of overlap. That's where your insights live.



These conversations are your compass. Listen carefully. Take copious notes, write as fast and furious as you can. The market will tell you where your brand should go.

Phase 3: Making Meaning from Customer Conversations

3.1. Interpreting the “data”

Listen for Repetition and Language Cues

- **Repeated Words or Phrases:** Notice if certain words keep showing up (e.g., “easy,” “always,” “on it,” “different”). This is what sticks.
- **Echoed or Off-Script Language:** Are customers repeating your brand lines naturally or inventing their own to describe you? Either way, it reveals perception.
- **Figurative Language:** Listen for metaphors, similes, and shorthand like “lifeline,” “rock,” “secret weapon,” or “came through when it counted.” These indicate emotional value, what your service *means*, not just what it *does*.

Pull Meaning from Stories

- **Cluster Themes:** Don’t just catalog answers, connect them. Group by topic (speed, personal touch, ease, reliability) to surface patterns.
- **Watch for High-Energy Moments:** Pay attention to when customers lean in or speak with conviction, especially when they talk about wins, letdowns, or turning points.
- **Spot the Gaps:** Listen for tension or unmet expectations (“It’s great, but...”). These gaps often point to powerful opportunities to stand out.
- **Note What’s Missing:** What don’t they talk about? If a differentiator you claim never comes up, that’s worth investigating.

Capture What’s Useful

- **Pull Memorable Quotes:** Great customer phrases are often clearer, bolder, and more relatable than anything in your current messaging. Save them. Use them.
- **Sense the Storyline: Ask yourself:** What’s the moral here? What would this customer say you’re *really* good at and does it match what you claim?

Synthesize

- **Reality Check Your Differentiators:** Map what you’re hearing back to what you say. Are your differentiators recognized, valued, and remembered? Or are they absent or misaligned?
- **Upgrade Language:** Use customer phrasing as raw material to strengthen your own copy, pitch, and positioning.
- **Document the Real Wins:** Highlight the differentiators that show up clearly and often. These are the ones worth leaning into and building from.



Contrary to urban legend, the most compelling brand differentiators aren't invented at happy hour on a napkin, definitely not in the boardroom. They're discovered in the market, echoed in stories, and repeated in the plain language of users, ticket holders, graduates, and sponsors who recognize the value, retell the difference, and return because it meant something to them.

That's why the strongest brand language doesn't sound like marketing, it sounds like the customer. When people hear their own priorities, frustrations, values, and language reflected in your storytelling, it signals that your company understands them. It makes your value feel true, obvious, and credible.

Phase 4: Pressure-Test Your Positioning

Your differentiator only works if it still works. This phase is about reassessing where you stand, inside your market, against competitors, and within your own brand behavior.

Think of this as a calibration. You're checking to see if your edge has dulled, if others have caught up, or if you've strayed from what once made you compelling. This step requires honesty, curiosity, and a willingness to shift if needed.

Take your time. Be specific. Write down what you find.

4.1 Scan your top 3 to 5 competitors or alternatives

These could be companies in your space—or options your customer might consider instead of you.

- What differentiators are they actively claiming? Look at their websites, social media, ads, and how they describe their value.
- Are they now saying something you once led with?
- Have any of your original edges become standard in the industry?
- Are they focusing on a part of the market you've overlooked?

Tip: Don't just look at their words, watch what they emphasize, invest in, and repeat.

4.2 Zoom out beyond direct competitors

Markets don't sit still. You need to understand the broader shifts around you.

- Has the category changed shape in any way? Are expectations different than they were a year or two ago?
- Are customer priorities shifting—price sensitivity, speed, flexibility, sustainability?
- Is there white space? Are there problems being ignored or opportunities no one's claiming?



Tip: Trends in adjacent industries can signal what your audience might expect next.

4.3 Check your own drift

Even the best brands lose their edge if they stop reinforcing it.

- Do your differentiators still show up clearly in your homepage, sales decks, emails, and onboarding?
- Or have you buried your value under too much messaging, added complexity, or started to sound like everyone else?

Tip: Pull up your own site and pretend you're a new visitor. Would someone know what makes you different in the first 20 seconds?

5. Final Phase: Turn Insight into Action

Whether you've worked through this process alone or with a team, this is the point where it all takes shape. You've collected valuable insight. Now you need to turn it into strategic direction.

Start by organizing your findings. Create a clear, concise presentation of your current position, what the market is signaling, what differentiators are still holding, and what needs to evolve. Whether it's a slide deck, written brief, or working session agenda, this output needs to be shareable, reviewable, and actionable.

5.1 Choose your collaborators wisely.

Even if this effort is yours to lead, don't try to finish it in a vacuum. Curate a small group of internal stakeholders who understand the business and care about what's on the line—marketing, product, sales, and operations all bring valuable lenses. The goal isn't consensus. It's clarity. You want diverse inputs that sharpen your thinking, not stall it.

5.2 Frame the discussion.

Set clear expectations when you present your insights. You are not asking for approval. You are inviting partnership in execution. Walk through:

- What you found
- What changed
- What matters now
- What decisions need to be made
- What support you need to activate

5.3 Revisit Your Differentiators

Go back to the differentiator list you began with. One by one, ask:

- Is it still relevant to today's customer?



- Is it still true in day-to-day delivery?
- Is it still distinct in the market?
- Can we prove it through experience, data, or outcomes?

5.4 Decide What to Keep, Drop, or Rework

Make disciplined decisions with confidence:

- Drop what no longer resonates, is vague, or can't be backed up.
- Reframe what's real but underused or misunderstood.
- Sharpen what's working, tighten the phrasing, clarify the proof, make it stronger.
- Add if the market has moved and you've earned new ground.

5.4 Operationalize Your Position

If your differentiators aren't backed by operations, they're not differentiators. If they're more spin than substance, they're not differentiators. If your team can't deliver them, defend them, or even define them, they're not differentiators. Train your team to understand and use them.

- Write them into your decks, proposals, and onboarding.
- Bake them into customer experience and delivery.
- Hold leaders accountable for protecting and modeling them.

If your differentiators are just talk, they're not differentiators. If they don't guide real behavior, they're just spin. And if you don't prioritize them, no one else will.

5.5 Turn Positioning into Practice

This isn't a one-and-done branding exercise. It's an ongoing habit that keeps your edge sharp and your brand banking equity.

- Revisit your differentiators at least twice a year.
- Reassess anytime the market shifts, your sales slow, or the questions change.
- Treat positioning like infrastructure. It keeps everything else aligned.

Don't Just Show Up. Stand Apart.

This is not a rebrand.

This is a discipline.

Check your differentiators at least once a year, or at any time your market shifts, your sales slow, or your customers start asking questions they didn't before.



Differentiation isn't a story you tell. It's a strategy you deliver.

What You Just Worked Through? That's Our Monday.

If this case study cracked something open for you, good. You're not alone. Most brands operate on instinct and hope. You're choosing alignment and evidence. If you work through the process, please, let us know how it goes. We'd love to know what you learned.

At Rally Cry, we specialize in turning differentiation into action. We don't just define what makes your brand different, we test it. In the wild. With customers, competitors, and friction.

We design and run full-scale market tests of your positioning, so you don't have to guess. You'll know what resonates, what converts, what needs reworking, and what's already working harder than you realized.

This is where we thrive: at the intersection of insight, execution, and proof. Especially for brands that carry weight—those creating jobs, shaping communities, or selling something complex, invisible, or high-stakes.

If you've got a position you think holds but haven't tested...

If your brand is scattered and in crisis...

If you're tired of sounding like everyone else, or worse, being compared to them...

Call us. We live for this challenge!



Addendum:

Emails:

1. Customer

Subject: We're Listening. You're Someone Worth Hearing

Hi [Name],

I'm reaching out to ask for about 20 minutes of your time to discuss our partnership, hear how things are going on your end, and get your honest perspective on how we're showing up for you.

Your feedback helps us sharpen how we work, where we focus, and what we invest in next. It's a chance to learn more about your business, listen to what's working (or not), and understand what really matters to you right now.

Let me know if there's a time next week that works, I'll make it easy and flexible.

Appreciate you,
[Your Name]

2. Customer Who Uses a Competitor

Subject: We're Listening. You're Someone Worth Hearing

Hi [Name],

I know we're not working together right now, and that's exactly why I'm reaching out.

I'd really appreciate 20 minutes to talk through how things are going, what's working for you, and how we can better show up where it counts. No pitch, just honest listening. Your insight helps us improve and keeps us aligned with what truly matters to customers like you.

If you're open, I'll make it simple to schedule. Let me know what works for you next week.

Thanks so much,
[Your Name]

3. Good Customer Who Left



Subject: We're Listening. You're Someone Worth Hearing

Hi [Name],

I'm reaching out because I've been thinking about your time with us, and I'd genuinely value your perspective.

Would you be open to a 20-minute conversation about what made you move on, what you're finding elsewhere, and what we could have done differently? I'm not trying to win you back (unless that's on the table), just hoping to learn from someone whose opinion I respect.

If you're open, I'll make it easy and work around your schedule. Either way, wishing you continued success.

Warmly,

[Your Name]

4. Potential Customer You'd Love to Work With

Subject: We're Listening. You're Someone Worth Hearing

Hi [Name],

I'll keep this quick: I've been following your work and really admire what you're building. I'd love to connect for a short 20-minute conversation, no agenda, no pitch.

I'm always looking to better understand the kinds of leaders and organizations we hope to support. If you're open to sharing a bit about what's working for you, where you're heading, and what partners need to get right, I'd be grateful.

Let me know if there's a time next week that works for you. I'll keep it simple and worth your while.

All my best,

[Your Name]



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Airbnb SEC Filings and Quarterly Reports

Expedia Group Investor Relations & Vrbo Performance Summaries

Publicly available user reviews, Google Trends, and search data

Social listening via public platforms (Reddit, TikTok, Instagram, X)

Airbnb and Vrbo official websites, brand pages, and campaign archives

Competitive benchmarking using SimilarWeb, SEMrush, and public UX audits