



## The Case for Contrast: *Differentiation*

This is a strategic dissection of two companies that sell the exact same thing, but compete in completely different ways.

Airbnb and Vrbo both hand you the keys to a temporary home. But those keys unlock entirely different brands, differentiations, experiences, and host uniquely different markets. Their success isn't about real estate. It's about positioning. About differentiation that speaks to specific people in specific ways and makes decision making simple.

This case study lays out, side-by-side, how each brand built differentiated brands by leaning into contrast. In doing so, they've become more than rental platforms. They're models of how to compete to win: how to earn faster decisions, deeper trust, and market share without relying on price.

Stick around for the self-check audit at the end, it's a credible guide to knowing how your own brand stacks up when it comes to standing out.

### **This isn't a hospitality lesson.**

It's a wake-up call for any brand selling ideas, services, access, or outcomes.

If you're in healthcare, higher ed, consulting, manufacturing, tech, or any other market that is highly competitive, this is for you.

### **No Differentiation = No Decision.**

In a saturated market, your biggest risk isn't losing out to a competitor. It's being lumped in with them.

When a buyer can't tell the difference, they default to price, or they delay the decision altogether. You don't necessarily lose to better; you lose to uncertainty.

That's the real cost of a diluted brand position: slower sales, second-guessing, price pressure. No urgency. No confidence. No sale.

### **Differentiation isn't an add on. It's a critical decision-making tool.**

Features give people a reason to get on board, assign value, see relevance, and feel compelled, one way or the other. And when your differentiation genuinely reflects what your market needs and wants, it becomes the backbone of:

- Brand equity



- Competitive insulation
- Trust acceleration
- Pricing power
- Organizational focus

A well-positioned brand that knows what it does best, how it does it and who it makes happy is the most efficient growth lever.

### **Why Airbnb and Vrbo?**

Because they're in the same category, in the same market, and often in the same search results, yet they pull entirely different customers by leading with different distinctions that woo and compel different customer cohorts.

That's what makes this comparison relevant across industries.

- They prove that two brands can thrive in the same space, not by outspending each other, not by reacting to each other, but by leaning fully into a differentiated lane, serving different truths, different needs, and different kinds of customers with their different positions.
- They prove that differentiation, consistency, storytelling, and experience are more powerful than discounts.
- And they prove that brand isn't just a look. It's a different perspective that shapes strategy and informs features.

Let's break it down before we pressure-test your positioning and differentiators.

## **Brand Overviews**

Same Offering. Different Orbit.

### **Vrbo**

#### **Founding Story**

Originally launched in 1995 as "Vacation Rentals by Owner," Vrbo was a scrappy listing platform long before short-term rentals were a category. In 2006 it was acquired, and in 2019 rebranded under Expedia Group. Now, it's a mainstay of vacation travel for U.S. families looking for space, not flair.

#### **Mission, Vision, Brand Values**

Vrbo doesn't romanticize travel. It simplifies it. Their mission centers on togetherness, making it easy for families and friends to spend time away without disruption or surprises.

Their implicit values? Privacy, practicality, peace of mind.



### **Market Position**

Vrbo owns the “whole home” narrative. You’re not crashing with a stranger or adapting to someone else’s lifestyle. You’re walking into a private, ready-to-relax space built around *your people*. It’s not about living someone else’s best life but enjoying your own. It’s about familiarity, predictable, repeatable, and built for group travel.

### **Airbnb**

#### **Founding Story**

Airbnb began in 2008 with two guys, three air mattresses, and a rented living room during a sold-out conference. From hack to juggernaut, it grew into a global platform that redefined how we think about travel, hospitality, and even belonging.

#### **Mission, Vision, Brand Values**

Airbnb’s mission: *“To create a world where anyone can belong anywhere.”*

It’s a vision rooted in discovery, identity, and human connection, designed to challenge the traditional hospitality model by replacing it with lived-in warmth and cultural immersion.

### **Market Position**

Airbnb doesn’t just rent places. It promises the tantalizing possibility of something more.

More than comfort, discovery. More than convenience, a story.

It sells perspective, identity, and the feeling of belonging somewhere you’ve never been. It appeals to the explorer, the digital nomad, the wanderer with a well-stamped passport who sees travel as transformation. It leads with variety, cultural cachet, and the promise of feeling something new.

## **Market Landscape & Customer Segments**

When the market is crowded, segmentation is survival.

Airbnb and Vrbo operate in the exact same industry: short-term accommodations. But they don’t fight over the same space, they’ve *divided the field*. Not by accident. By design.

Their segmentation strategies reveal a playbook every growth-minded brand should steal from.

### **Airbnb: The Identity-Driven Explorer**

#### **Target Segments**

- Solo travelers, couples, creatives
- Digital nomads, remote workers



- Urban adventurers & off-grid seekers
- Younger travelers seeking culture, not just comfort

### **Market Needs They Address**

- **Flexibility:** Shared room for a night or a treehouse for a month
- **Identity affirmation:** "I don't just travel. I am a member of the *global community*."
- **Discovery:** Unique, culturally embedded experiences
- Price accessibility at the entry level

**Their Strategy:** Airbnb doesn't sell rooms. They sell *the version of yourself* you want to be while you're away. It's not about features, it's about freedom, curiosity, and connection.

### **Vrbo: The Trusted Group Getaway**

#### **Target Segments**

- Families with children
- Multi-generational travel
- Friend groups booking beach houses, ski trips, and reunions.
- Pet owners needing space & yard

#### **Market Needs They Address**

- **Privacy:** Entire-home rentals only
- **Predictability:** Fewer surprises, more reviews, clearer policies
- **Space:** Bedrooms, kitchens, driveways, yards
- Ease of coordination for multiple guests

**Their Strategy:** Vrbo leads with control and convenience. It's less about discovery, more about dependability. Their promise: "*You handle the packing. We've handled everything else.*"

### **The Broader Market**

Factor	Airbnb	Vrbo
Booking Volume	Higher overall	Strong in vacation zones
Global Penetration	Dominant in urban markets	U.S.-focused, leisure-driven
Industry Trend	Experience economy	Stability, repeat behavior
Booking Cadence	Short notice to long stays	Planned, multi-night trips



## Factor

## Airbnb

## Vrbo

### Brand Influence

Lifestyle brand

Utility brand with loyalty

## INSIGHT FOR LEADERS

Segmentation is a strategic weapon.

Airbnb and Vrbo didn't claim their space by chasing everyone. They earned market share by getting laser-clear about *who* they serve, *what* those people care about, and *how* to show up for them with purpose. This clarity drives every part of their operation, from product design and messaging to platform UX and brand tone.

When leaders understand the distinct needs, desires, and decision-making patterns of their true customer segments, they stop reacting to competitors and start setting the pace with their base of support.

The question isn't, "How big is the market?"

It's, "Whose problems are we best built to solve and how visibly are we doing that?"

## Core Brand Positioning and Value Proposition

Clear positioning doesn't start with what you offer. It starts with who it's for, what they care about, and how fast they can tell you're the right choice.

Airbnb and Vrbo operate in the same category but communicate entirely different promises. Not just with words, but with structure, processes, and a business model that aligns across every touchpoint. They each know who they're speaking to and why that audience will choose them over someone else.

These aren't just creative exercises. They're conversion tools. Each brand positions itself to remove friction and accelerate trust.

## Vrbo

### Positioning Summary

Vrbo positions itself as the easy choice for families and groups planning real vacations, not wanderlust escapes. It leans into privacy, comfort, and predictability. Their voice and product design serve that positioning completely. From the moment you land on their site, you're steered toward whole homes and family-ready listings.

### Messaging Pillars

- The whole house, every time
- Only your people
- A trip that feels like home



- Designed for family time, not check-in chaos

### **Customer-Facing Promise:**

You get the entire home. No strangers. No surprises. Just space to relax, reconnect, and make time for the people you came with.

### **Reality Check**

Vrbo doesn't try to be trendy. And it doesn't pretend its customer is anyone other than who they are: families, planners, and groups seeking control, not surprises. The clarity of their message matches the simplicity of their model. It speaks to a buyer who needs peace of mind and ease of execution.

## **Airbnb**

### **Positioning Summary**

Airbnb positions itself as the more soulful, spontaneous option. It's not just a booking platform. It's a vehicle for cultural immersion and self-discovery. Their promise isn't space. It's story. A whole new reality. They've mapped every feature to match that promise, from flexible trip types to host-curated experiences.

### **Messaging Pillars**

- Belong anywhere
- Live like a local
- Every stay, a new story
- Travel that opens you up

### **Customer-facing Promise**

This isn't just a place to stay. It's a chance to feel part of something different, even if it's just for one night.

### **Reality Check**

Airbnb assumes its customers want more than a roof; they want a memory. That assumption drives their UX, host guidelines, pricing flexibility, and even their tone of voice. While it works for seekers and creatives, it doesn't work for everyone. And they don't try to make it fit. That's positioning discipline.

## **Insight for Leaders**

Too many brands define their position around what they think makes them unique without checking if it matters to the market. Internal pride points don't usually convert to value.

Vrbo and Airbnb succeed because they both strategically honed in on contrasting differentiators that solve a customer need, then they shaped their voice, visuals, operations, and choices around it.



The question isn't "What makes us different?" or "What do we want to do?"  
It's "What difference matters to the people we're trying to win?"

### **Brand first, strategy second!**

Positioning is not about being clever. It is about being definitive.

Vrbo and Airbnb do not just tell different stories. They accelerate consumer interest by making clear, value-driven promises that align with who they serve and what those people care about. That is the function of strong positioning. It connects a unique value to a specific audience need, clearly and consistently, across every touchpoint.

Clever messaging may improve recall. But it is clarity around your strategy, differentiators, your unique value proposition: what you do, who it is for, and why it matters more than the alternatives, that drives decisions.

Be specific. Be valuable. Be known for something that matters.

## **Differentiation Strategies**

There's a difference between offering something different and being seen as different. The latter is where value lives.

Vrbo and Airbnb often appear in the same search results, and yet rarely compete head-to-head. That's because their differentiators aren't rooted in category disruption, they're rooted in customer alignment.

They've each committed to specific promises, experiences, and emotional outcomes. What sets them apart isn't what's on paper. It's what their customers feel, expect, and repeat.

### ***Product and Service Differentiation***

Vrbo offers only entire-property rentals. This eliminates variability and filters out incompatible guest types from the start. Their listings are structured around multi-bedroom, family-suited stays with kitchens, yards, and driveways. No hosts in the next room. No shared bathrooms. Just space.

Airbnb embraces a spectrum. Shared rooms, lofts, remote cabins, luxury apartments. This range allows them to serve multiple trip types, from a one-night stopover to a three-month work-from-anywhere lifestyle. Their product scope is broader but still curated to support the idea of unique experience.

**Takeaway:** Vrbo narrowed to own trust. Airbnb expanded to own flexibility.

### ***Emotional and Experiential Differentiation***

#### **Vrbo's Emotional Terrain: Familiarity as Luxury**



Vrbo markets peace of mind. Their emotional hook is ease and control. The trip feels handled before it starts. You know where the kids will sleep. You know where you'll park. The experience is less about escape and more about settling in.

This isn't the thrill of new. It's the comfort of known. Vrbo doesn't invite you to imagine another life. It hands you the keys to a place where your life works just the way it should, only with a better view and more room for everyone.

Vrbo isn't about discovery. It's about *settling in*. You know who is under the roof, you can walk barefoot through the house without seeing a stranger. You're not escaping your life. You're enjoying it, uninterrupted.

**In short:**

Vrbo offers return to something familiar, in a new location.

Airbnb offers escape into something unfamiliar.

**Airbnb's Emotional Terrain: Living Someone Else's Best Life**

Airbnb markets possibility. Their emotional hook is transformation. A stay is an opening, to a place, a culture, a self you don't meet at home. Even the interface encourages exploration over filtering.

When we say Airbnb markets transformation, we're not talking about some abstract, spiritual change. It's about the everyday thrill of stepping into someone else's rhythm, even just for a night.

Airbnb doesn't just sell a bed. It sells the feeling of living differently, waking up in a treehouse, writing emails from a sun-drenched flat in Lisbon, cooking with spices you've never used in a kitchen you've never been in. It's not your routine. It's not your furniture. It's not your normal. That's the appeal.

**In short:**

Airbnb gives you someone else's life for a little while.

Vrbo reunites you with your life and your people in a different location.

**Takeaway:** One calms the nervous system. The other stimulates curiosity. Both are highly bankable emotions, just for different customers.

**Brand Voice and Storytelling**

Vrbo's voice is steady and no-nonsense. Helpful, reliable, and structured to reduce decision fatigue. It speaks in clear, practical terms and emphasizes family togetherness over lifestyle ambition.

Airbnb's voice is warm, evocative, and inviting. It tells stories. It leans into visual language and emotion. It isn't just describing features, it's painting a picture of who you could be in that space.



**Takeaway:** Vrbo lowers risk. Airbnb increases allure. Both deepen perceived value.

### ***Visual Identity***

Vrbo's design system is clean, blue-toned, and built to project security and order. Their listings prioritize details and logistics.

Airbnb's visual world is soft, expressive, and emotionally charged. Photography leads. Typography feels human. The product looks like it's been designed for inspiration, not just information.

**Takeaway:** Vrbo is a directory. Airbnb is an invitation.

### ***Distribution and Channel Strategy***

Vrbo relies heavily on integration with Expedia Group, surfacing listings in vacation bundles and search results through affiliate sites. This amplifies its presence for travel planners booking in advance.

Airbnb drives traffic through brand equity, SEO, and word-of-mouth. It lives more naturally in lifestyle content and editorial travel recommendations.

**Takeaway:** Vrbo leans on logical path-to-purchase. Airbnb leverages emotional serendipity.

### ***Pricing and Business Model***

Vrbo simplifies with fewer fees and clearer rates. This reduces friction for families planning within a budget. Their pricing philosophy is stable and transaction-oriented.

Airbnb uses dynamic pricing, layered service fees, and upsell opportunities via Experiences and longer-term stays. Their pricing model matches their product spectrum—varied and flexible, but sometimes harder to decode.

**Takeaway:** Vrbo monetizes simplicity. Airbnb monetizes personalization.

### ***Insight for Leaders***

Differentiation occurs when a company defines and delivers unique value through its product features, service model, brand experience, pricing, customer focus, or emotional appeal in ways that are relevant to the customer and clearly distinct from competitors.

Airbnb and Vrbo prove that sharing a category does not mean sharing a market or approach. Each company has grown by anchoring its entire system, product, pricing, voice, design, and user experience, around specific, deliberate distinctions. These are not vague brand traits or lofty taglines. They are operational choices that shape what the customer notices, remembers, and returns for.

Real differentiators drive how your team makes decisions, how your product is built, how your story is told, and how your customer feels from first click to final outcome.



### **Ask yourself:**

- Does your differentiator influence what you fund, build, and prioritize?
- Would your customer name it before your team does?
- Does it reduce confusion, speed up decisions, or create loyalty before price is ever mentioned?

The goal is not to be different. The goal is to be the obvious choice for a specific market that is large enough to sustain your business. The more precise that market is, the faster your brand earns trust, traction, and growth.

Differentiation isn't just about being better. It's about clearly and intentionally offering something different that matters to your market. It's operationalized, marketed, and aligns with what the people want.

## **Key Touchpoints – Comparative Analysis**

Differentiation only becomes positioning when it's operational, when it shapes internal strategy, trains teams, guides operations, and shows up in the day to day. Positioning is what gets reinforced or diluted in every website visit, sales pitch, customer support interaction, and onboarding session.

The customer doesn't need all the answers. They just need one thing to feel true. They just need enough information to confidently decide. When your touchpoints all express your brand differentiators, trust accelerates. When they don't, people pause.

Airbnb and Vrbo both operate across hundreds of touchpoints, yet you know almost instantly which brand you're inside. That is not luck. It's consistency of thought, tone, and experience.

### **Website and Digital Experience**

Vrbo's site is optimized for clarity and utility. Filters are prominent. Listings are uniform. Language is transactional but calming. It gives the impression that you're building a reliable plan. It reinforces a promise of predictability. The design favors function.

Airbnb's site is expressive. Photography leads. The homepage encourages browsing before filtering. It prioritizes wonder over structure. You get the sense that the best listings aren't the ones you search for, they're the ones that surprise you. Even the UX is aligned with emotional exploration.

### **Takeaway**

Vrbo reinforces confidence in booking. Airbnb reinforces curiosity in discovering.



## ***Marketing Campaigns***

Vrbo's campaigns emphasize family, tradition, and simplicity. Their messaging is about shared time, fewer surprises, and memory-making that isn't performative. The imagery features large groups, often multigenerational. Tone is heartfelt, but grounded.

Airbnb's campaigns center on individuality, cultural access, and story. Recent campaigns have included first-person host narratives, slow travel vignettes, and editorial-style cinematography. Tone is creative and personal, bordering on cinematic.

### **Takeaway**

Vrbo markets trust. Airbnb markets transformation.

## ***Partnerships and Influencer Strategy***

Vrbo works with family lifestyle influencers, travel bloggers, and outdoor vacation content partners. Their partnerships are modest and usually embedded in trip planning platforms or bundled with family travel tools.

Airbnb collaborates with spatial storytellers, global lifestyle influencers, and travel editors. Their partnerships extend into documentaries, city guides, and even political conversations around housing and local impact.

### **Takeaway**

Vrbo earns reach through association with travel logistics. Airbnb earns influence through association with identity and culture.

## ***Physical Presence and Customer Touch***

Neither brand has a physical retail presence, but the host or home itself becomes the final touchpoint.

Vrbo listings feel like borrowed homes, not borrowed lives. The transaction ends at the door.

Airbnb experiences often include host interactions, custom notes, snacks, stories, or guest books. There is more friction, but also more emotional texture.

### **Takeaway**

Vrbo ends with arrival. Airbnb begins with it.

## ***Insight for Leaders***

**Positioning is not a tagline, it is a system.**

When a brand's positioning is properly aligned, it reinforces itself at every level of the business. Each touchpoint becomes a proof point. Every click, campaign, and conversation reinforce the value proposition and strengthens perception.

That is the discipline on display in both Vrbo and Airbnb. Despite offering the same fundamental service, they shape entirely different customer expectations because they



operationalize their positioning from the inside out. From UX and copywriting to influencer strategy and final moments in the guest experience, each brand's choices mirror its promise.

For leaders, this is a diagnostic tool. If your marketing says one thing and your onboarding says another, you're not reinforcing your brand, you're diluting it.

Ask yourself:

- Can a customer tell what makes you different within the first 30 seconds of any interaction?
- Does every department know how to reinforce your positioning in its decisions and outputs?
- Are your brand's key promises easy to locate in your design, language, structure, and partnerships?

Alignment is not a creative flourish. It is what makes positioning real. And when executed well, it turns brand perception into business performance.

## Strategic Recommendations

### **Brand positioning is not a one-time decision.**

It's a system you maintain, pressure-test, and evolve as your audience, market, and offerings shift. A strong differentiator only stays strong if it continues to mean something to the people you're trying to reach and serve.

Both Airbnb and Vrbo are still growing. But their trajectories show how easy it is to drift from relevance if you're not tracking perception, user behavior, and unmet need in real time.

### **Brand positioning is not a one-time decision.**

It's a system you maintain, pressure-test, and evolve as your audience, market, and offerings shift. A strong differentiator only stays strong if it continues to mean something to the people you're trying to reach and serve.

Both Airbnb and Vrbo are still growing. Their trajectories depend on intimately understanding their markets: tracking perception, user behavior, and unmet need in real time. Each brand earned its edge not through novelty, but through a very nuanced awareness of its market, and a commitment to staying inside that market's priorities, preferences, and patterns.

What every brand should take from their example is this: Positioning requires precision, and precision requires proximity. You have to stay close to your market if you want to keep your footing. Because when the market moves—and it will—it's your research, not your instincts, that will tell you what needs to change and what needs to hold.

### **Insight for Leaders**

Even the best positioning falls apart without a strategy and an implementation plan. Brand equity isn't a static asset, it's the result of daily alignment between what you promise, what you deliver, and what people experience. The advantage belongs to the brands who take



their position seriously. That means prioritizing and measuring the operational relevance of your differentiators.

You don't need a new story every year. You need a system that keeps your best one true.

## Conclusion

Differentiation is not a creative choice. It's a business decision. One of the most important you'll make.

Brands that win are not necessarily the most innovative, the most funded, or even the most visible. They are the ones that make it easy for people to choose them. That only happens when your positioning is clear, your promise is felt, and your message is consistent from the first search to the final handshake.

Airbnb and Vrbo succeed not because they avoid overlap, but because they own their differences. In the same category, with similar inventory, they built entirely different brands, by picking a point of view, committing to it, and aligning their business around it.

They're not just proof that differentiation works. They're proof that without it, even a good product struggles to earn attention, trust, or time.

If you're building or running a brand, whether in healthcare, higher education, advanced manufacturing, or professional services, this case study isn't just a comparison. It's a call to action.

Not for reinvention. Not for disruption.  
For clarity.

Because in a crowded market, you don't have to be everything.  
You just have to be *the right thing*—to the right people—and make it obvious.

### **Time to check in on your own brand.**

Not just what you say you are.  
But what people feel when they meet you.  
What they remember.  
And what they tell someone else when they try to explain why they chose you.  
That's where brand lives.  
That's where differentiation performs.  
And that's the part you control.



# 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.

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### **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]

## Citations & Sources

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