

The logo for Wilson, featuring the word "wilson" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The letters are white with a thin black outline, set against a background of red and white concentric waves.

POSITION | OFFER | AUDIENCE | MESSAGE | DELIVERY

# FIVE GATES OF BRANDING

OPENING THE PATH TO  
RENEWED BRAND GROWTH



# BRANDS CAN LIVE FOREVER

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**Brands can live forever. In fact, they should.** That is what we believe. The key to continuous growth is to recognize the signs that could lead to a decline and take proactive steps to correct the course before it's too late. In our experience working with hundreds of brands going through this transformation, we've identified five steps or "gates" that brands must continuously evaluate and pass through to remain viable. They are: **Position, Offer, Audience, Message and Delivery.**

Smart brands continuously revisit each of these gates periodically to ensure that they haven't been unknowingly locked behind them. If that would happen, the only gate a brand would face would be the exit toward irrelevance. This eBook takes a look at each of the gates—knowing what to look for will help you and your brand find new and sustainable growth for years to come. And live forever.



# POSITION

## WHERE DO YOU STAND?



01



## A BRAND'S STRENGTH STARTS WITH ITS POSITION

The basis for a strong brand is its position. This is the space or reputation that a brand claims in the marketplace. It is the “**who are you?**” existential question that companies have to truthfully ask and answer themselves. This is the idea that will support everything that follows. If you aren’t honest, your audience will know, you will be found out, and you will fail. The people will know.

With more than 25 years of experience working with leading brands, this is **consistently the most difficult for brands** to unlock and open. Once the positioning foundation is established, the others gates typically fall into place rather smoothly.

**“ UNDER THE CAUSE OF DEATH ON A BRAND’S DEATH CERTIFICATE, IT SHOULD USUALLY READ ARROGANCE, GREED OR COMPLACENCY.**

NIAILL FITZGERALD, CHAIRMAN OF UNILEVER.



# 01



## WHAT MAKES A STRONG BRAND POSITION?

Your strongest position is at the intersection of what your customers want, what your brand does best, and what it does better than the competition. Where many brands stumble is that they don't realize that the key to a strong position is to **exclude the extraneous and sharpen their focus**. The natural tendency is to include everything possible—bigger is better, right? Not so, especially with a brand facing decline. All around the intersection of what your customers want and what you do well are pitfalls. There are things your competitors do better, things you don't offer, and/or things you

do that customers don't find interesting. Spending time here wastes your resources while diluting your identity and failing to differentiate who you are in the market.

For established brands, this might involve moving away from existing positions they've held for years. That can be a tough decision—but going to market with a weak brand will result in an undesirable outcome in the long run. It's more important to **reinvigorate your position to stay alive** than submit to arrogance or greed.



# 01



## SIGNS OF AN AGING BRAND

There are many signs that a brand might have aged out of its positioning. For example, a decrease in overall market share. This could be caused by new competitors moving into the space or a result of the **audience just losing interest**. For publicly traded companies, fluctuations and changes in stock price and activity could indicate shifts in the market. A decline in customer satisfaction scores could be another sign of aging. These scores could be impacted by competitors or decline just due to general familiarity with the product or service, resulting in less enthusiasm than when it was new. It's also possible that the entire

market aged out of that position, in which case you'll have to **follow them or find a new one**. The most important component of a brand aging beyond its position is the inability to innovate. Remaining fixed in position is no longer a component of business lifecycle success.

**“A BRAND CAN BE VERY AGED, BUT STILL BE YOUNG AND MODERN IN ITS CONSUMERS’ MIND.”**

JEAN-MARC LEHU, COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA PHD MANAGEMENT, UNIVERSITÉ DE PARIS



# 01

## REALISTIC PERSPECTIVE

A black and white photograph showing a close-up, low-angle view of a modern building's glass facade. The glass panels are arranged in a grid pattern, creating a series of vertical and horizontal lines that converge towards the top left of the frame. The building's structure is visible through the glass.

Because brands are multi-faceted, you'll need to encompass multiple angles to create an accurate representation of your brand position. This takes several steps.

First, you need to record what your purpose is. **What does your brand do best**, what do your consumers want from a business in your industry, and why do consumers, when they have choices, choose the competition? There are an infinite number of worksheets and templates to accomplish this, but it is the first and most critical step in identifying your differentiator. Collaborate with your team, share perspectives and findings from conversations they are

having with customers and ensure alignment. Once you create a list of all your brand characteristics, then you can **create alignment on your strongest characteristics**.

Second, you need outside perspectives, preferably from your current consumers and relevant but unbiased outsiders. Ideally these external sources would represent both prospects and experts in the field. Evaluating this feedback will enable you to either **validate your perception** or determine how far off course you were. From there, you can outline a path to return to the core position.



# OFFER

## WHAT ARE YOU GIVING?

Products lose their relevance. But great brands live forever. That's because **your brand is not your product:** your brand is what you promise and offer the customer. The question is, "what is your brand offer?"

It's not as simple as it sounds. You need to get to a final and ultimate definition—and it's not about your current product.





# 02

## LOOK BEYOND

Theodore Levitt, author of “Marketing Myopia” revealed decades ago why believing that your product is your brand is a risky line of thinking. “The railroads did not stop growing because the need for passenger and freight transportation declined,” he stated. “That grew. The railroads are in trouble today not because that need was filled by others (cars, trucks, airplanes, and even telephones) but because it was not filled by the railroads themselves. **They let others take customers away ...”**

What industry believes that it makes great products today, but could be the next to follow the railroad industry?



The potential list is long. Could the same thing happen to auto manufacturers? What place does “the ultimate driving machine” have in a world with self-driving cars? Do people want and buy laundry detergent—or do they really just want clean clothes?

According to Levitt, “In every case, the reason growth is threatened, slowed, or stopped is not because the market is saturated. It is because there has been **a failure of management.**” Identifying where and why your offer is failing is the next step. Following are five reasons that the market might reject your current offer.



# FIVE OFFER MISSTEPS OF MATURE BRANDS

## 1 Inadequate Promise of Satisfaction

What satisfied customers in days past might not be adequate to satisfy them now. Different offers by competitors or even other industries can change the point where a customer deems themselves satisfied and what they are willing to pay. The hotel industry is a great example. It used to be that clean sheets, a tidy room and maybe a pool would suffice. Now guests demand everything from free WiFi, breakfast, and personal attention on a first-name basis to have what they'll call a "great stay."

## 2 Innovation or R&D Falling Behind

In many industries, if you're not first, you're last when it comes to technology and your offer. This applies to even the strongest brands. Mercedes, for example,

must lead in both technology and quality to maintain their position. One or the other will not suffice.

## 3 Obsolete Production Methods

The length of time people are willing to wait for your promise and their quality expectations change over time. In manufacturing, the introduction of CNC manufacturing has dramatically changed both the time to delivery and quality expectations of customers—and they're not going to rewind.

## 4 Tone-Deaf Customer Experience

Make no mistake: every interaction a customer has with you is part of your brand. Through technology, the possible touch points for customers to interact with your brand have increased

dramatically and the experience is part of the offer, especially for online companies. Consider a company like Zappos. Their customers expect to be recognized personally at each interaction and would be disappointed if they were not. Why? Because that's the expectation that Zappos has set and it puts the same pressure on all of its competitors.

## 5 Dated Designs and Imagery

Visual impressions can mean a lot. In some categories, they mean everything. Some customers have a desire to be on the forefront of trends. They need the brand to reassure and reinforce that they are on the edge and won't associate with brands that appear dated. Additionally, when seen next to other brands that appear more current, the perceived value of the dated brand can seem diminished.



## 2 UNLOCKING THE BRAND OFFER GATE

We know that brands must move forward. That doesn't always mean your offer has to change—but that might well be the case. The critical point is that you must know exactly what your offer is to unlock the remaining gates in the branding process.

### REMEMBER THIS:

look beyond your current products to your ultimate promise. That is your lasting offer to customers and what actually warrants longevity.



# AUDIENCE

## WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?

03





# 03

## WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?

The fact is that a **brand audience can and will change**. Like the people they are comprised of, they age, their tastes evolve, and their needs change with them. In short, they grow up, sometimes old. Does your brand move with them—or can it meet the next generation in a similar space as the previous audience? Can it keep both?

One thing for sure is that audiences have the ability to move and adapt much, much faster than ever before. However long your previous audience cycle was, you can almost assuredly expect the next one to last half as long.

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**“ YOUR AUDIENCE STILL LOVES YOUR BRAND. THAT’S THE GOOD NEWS. THE BAD NEWS? THEY DON’T THINK ABOUT YOU ANYMORE.**

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## IT'S NOT ABOUT THE YEARS

Time and age don't define a legacy or mature brand. The brand audience does. Many of the world's most beloved brands are seemingly ageless. Even if they are decades or sometimes centuries old, and by any measure mature, they are not in decline. When consumers begin to neglect a brand is when the drop begins. This is when the audience begins to shrink and the trouble starts.

Research shows that most of these **declining brands are still appreciated by their audience.** The audience still likes them, but they don't purchase or engage with them anymore. It is not necessarily a reflection of the brand's quality. It could be because the brand seems too familiar to an audience looking for something new, or just appears dated compared to competitors. When that happens, market share drops, sales slip, and eventually those brands disappear from the audience memory.

## SWITCH ABC TO ABL— ALWAYS BE LISTENING

When was the last time you really had a conversation with your audience and listened? Thanks to social media, it's easier than ever to discover what is on your customers' minds and what they are saying about your brand. But you have to **participate in an authentic and respectful manner.** Have the discipline to create the most meaningful types of engagement versus just adding to the chatter. Deep within every audience are influencers, opinion drivers and trusted authorities—dressed as everyday people living in a very social world.





# FIVE POTENTIAL INDICATORS OF A DECLINING BRAND AUDIENCE

A vibrant and active brand audience is one sign of a healthy brand. But not every brand is fortunate enough have an extremely vocal audience. How else can you tell if your brand audience is healthy? Here are some key indicators of a declining brand audience. Any one of them could indicate trouble ahead.

## 1 Decreasing Consumer Population

Is the total number of people in your audience, both potential and actual, shrinking? People move, cities grow, other areas decline—trace the actual activity to discover the reason for the decline.

## 2 Non-Renewals

If you offer a service or subscription, are your customers continuing to return or renew? It's typically more expensive to gain new customers than keep your existing ones.

## 3 Increasing Consumer Average Age

When the average age of your consumer continuously increases each year, you're not replenishing your audience sufficiently for sustained growth.

## 4 Unsuccessful Product Launches and Updates

If your product changes and advancements aren't gaining acceptance in the marketplace, your brand won't be able to move forward. Brands that don't move forward are in trouble.

## 5 Absent Younger Consumer Segments

Even products designed for an older audience need to ensure that they continue to reach out and connect with those in the age demographic younger than their core audience.

**NEXT STEPS — AUDIENCE:** If you recognize any of these patterns, it's time to take action. You have essentially two courses of action; modify your existing audiences, or enlarge them. That's a subject that merits its own discussion.



# MESSAGE

## WHAT DO YOU SAY?

Owning the perfect position, with a great offer and the right audience, won't matter if your brand message doesn't connect. It's that simple. Like every brand aspect, **the message must evolve**, slightly in some cases, more drastic in others, or the brand will lose its relevance. That requires continuous care and even-handed stewardship.



# 04



# 4

## WHAT MAKES A GREAT BRAND MESSAGE?

The **key to a** successful message is authenticity. This is **where the audience sees, connects and interacts with your brand**. It is where the work you've done at the previous gates comes to life. It must accurately reflect the brand position and clearly communicate the offer using language that the audience recognizes as consistent with the brand. Sound simple? It's not.

Because message is a gate where you have control, it is also where the most outside input and opinions are thrust into the process. That can make arriving at the desired clarity that everyone can easily understand difficult, but necessary, as committees and executives insert their opinions.

Additionally, because the organization does control the outgoing message, there is the impression that it is the easiest to fix—just change the words. There is a tendency to bypass the other gates and begin tweaking the message without getting agreement on the position, offer and audience. Resist this. In the best-case scenario, when this does happen (jumping to the message), the brand could get lucky and possibly enjoy a short-term boost. In the worst case, the message could become completely and permanently blurred and confused in the audience mind, setting the stage for decline.



# BRAND MESSAGE—FOUR SIGNS OF SUCCESS

How do you know if you've created the right message for your brand? It takes a couple of steps, including internal tests combined with listening and monitoring your audience for its reaction. Ask yourself the four following questions to gauge where your brand message stands.

## 1 Is It Differentiated and Authentic?

When your message states clearly how the brand is different, and in a way that represents reality in a way that the audience agrees to be true, you're on the right path. These are also the table stakes and the first step. Your audience could agree and all of your statements might be true, but the message might not resonate with the audience and create engagement. You can compare it to the "perfect partner" that's not. All of the signs might be there that it should work, but there's no spark. And if there's no spark, you need to keep looking.

## 2 Is It Creating a Response?

There's a reason we're all here: to create a response that will help in some way to improve our business. That's it. As much

as we might enjoy writing and rewriting taglines or some other marketing task for hours on end, if they don't create some kind of response, it's wasted time. That response could be any number of things, many of which are more trackable than ever before. It could be a website visit, social share, or ideally, a sale or purchase.

## 3 Is It Delivering Referrals?

When your message is solid it will get the attention of your intended audience and move them in some way. And when it's really solid, they'll share it with their friends and associates. This is an important step. Studies show that unaffiliated referrals, from actual customers and users, are one of the most trusted channels for potential buyers to receive information.

## 4 Is It Part of the Lexicon?

If you are in perfect tune with your audience, your message could enter the general lexicon. When your audience not only knows your message by heart but also repeats and shares it as part of their everyday conversations, you know that you've nailed it. It might not last forever, but for a period of time, it can be extremely strong. "Where's the beef?" "A diamond is forever" and "It doesn't get any better than this" are all examples of messages that have entered the public sphere.



## NEXT STEPS – MESSAGE

Realize that your messaging must connect with your existing champions and evolve to lead a new wave of customers and advocates. **Craft a specific message**, and then get everyone in the organization behind it, even the CEO. When departments see buy-in from the top they'll recognize the importance and follow the example set.

“WE WANT TO TALK RIGHT DOWN TO EARTH IN A LANGUAGE THAT EVERYBODY HERE CAN EASILY UNDERSTAND.

MALCOLM X



# DELIVERY

## IS YOUR BRAND READY TO CONNECT?

05





# 05

# 05

## READY TO CONNECT?

Since the beginning of time, businesses have bemoaned the ability to reach their customers efficiently. One would think that with modern technology things are much better now? Unfortunately, the answer is no. As recent as 2014, Nielsen reported that **40% of online ads were not reaching their intended target audience.** That's a failure in the fifth of our five gates of branding: delivery.

Brand delivery is where your brand finally puts it all together and closes the loop with the customer. All of the work that you have done through the previous brand gates has led you here. Now it's time for some big decisions: how and where to actually connect with the customer.

This is also the gate that is dramatically impacted by outside costs. Where the previous gates are primarily internal and not overtly customer facing, delivery is where you go public. For those reasons—cost and public acceptance—getting it wrong can be catastrophic for your brand.



05

05

## RETURN TO SENDER

When your attempts at delivery fail, you won't get a "return to sender" notice in most cases. But unlike even a few years ago, where your communication would disappear into the void with no feedback, now with data and technology you can often **determine varying degrees of customer engagement**, even if it didn't lead to a final sale.

The number of options and communication channels available and the expectations for delivery have expanded exponentially in the last several years. That's both good and bad for marketers.

### THE GOOD

- The vast number of choices have driven down some costs, and removed many barriers to entry. This has allowed opportunities for many smaller organizations that they wouldn't have otherwise.
- You can be very granular and efficient in targeting your audience.
- Brands can find channels that precisely match and align with their characteristics.

### THE BAD

- There are so many choices that it is infeasible to be everywhere.
- It is nearly impossible to reach an entire audience through one channel.
- If you get it even slightly wrong, you could miss your audience completely.



## SIX DELIVERY CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR BRANDS

The challenge for mature brands is to know when your delivery is working and when you need to make changes to ensure longevity. There are two main considerations. First, are you reaching your audience and do they have the opportunity to choose your brand? Second, if you are reaching them and not getting chosen, why? Following are six signs and triggers to consider when evaluating your brand delivery.

### 1 Lack of Budget Commitment

While it's true that some marketing costs have decreased, if the reductions haven't been the result of increased efficiency, your brand could enter a decline. When revenues are tight, myopic companies that view marketing strictly as a cost often cut their marketing budgets—and cut themselves off at the knees in the process. If cuts are required, they should be strategic to maximize efficiency, not broad cuts across the board.

### 2 Wrong Place

Times and communication channels have changed. If your audience has moved to different channels, your message and offer might never be seen. Additionally, new members of your audience might never know that you exist if you aren't present as they enter the market. For example, a demographic that historically watched the 6:00 evening news might now be found on late-night TV. Or where 35 – 45-year-old news junkies read newspapers in the '80s, the same age group might now get their information from Facebook.

### 3 Packaging Fails

Packaging, both in appearance and physically, can dramatically impact consumer decisions. Some audiences will never consider a product with a dated design and relish change. For others, any change would be blasphemous. Consider bar soap for hand washing. Bars of soap used to be the most common, if not the only option. Now it's more likely that you'll find some kind of pump or liquid soap dispensed for that purpose. Soap manufacturers that don't have a liquid option now miss a huge part of that market.



## SIX DELIVERY CHALLENGES (CONTINUED)

### 4 Lack of Applied Data

Companies are collecting more and more information. The problem is that few organizations are able—or even trying—to use that data to make better decisions to drive their business. If they are using the data, it's looking backward at the delivery their audience used to prefer. Truly data-driven organizations will use the data to see forward and navigate to where their customers are, not where they used to be. When that happens they'll unlock repeatable pathways to increased success.

### 5 Mistaken Identity

While imitation might be the sincerest form of flattery, too much flattery can flatten sales. Competitors will try to borrow and steal, that's a given. One step can make that behavior more difficult and more legally defensible: align your identity to what you do as simply as possible. For example, if there is a single element, golden arches for instance, there is less to borrow from without crossing the line into plagiarism. The more elements, the more competitors can choose similar components that collectively can encroach on your brand.

### 6 Multiple Personalities

What makes a brand so powerful is that it provides a shortcut in consumers' minds. They know what you stand for, what they'll receive, and they know what you look like. When you are inconsistent in any of those areas it creates doubt and uncertainty, if they can recognize you at all. That's why it's critical to be consistent in your actions and appearance in all of your communications and across channels. Just like a true best friend will treat you with the same respect whether you're at a party with hundreds of people or riding together in a car, your brand should be consistent in its interactions.



# 05

## GATHERING MOMENTUM

Don't let your hard work go to waste this close to the finish. Carefully evaluate your audience's preferences and meet them where they are. Watch and listen to what happens. Use the data and technology available. Previous businesses did not have the technology resources we have today to test, examine, and refine our efforts

to improve marketing efficiency. In that regard, we're never finished. Because all markets are continuously evolving, change is inevitable. But when you know the right questions to ask and issues to look for, you can navigate ahead of the curve and maintain consistent growth.

**“FACTORIES RUST AWAY, PACKAGES BECOME OBSOLETE, PRODUCTS LOSE THEIR RELEVANCE. BUT GREAT BRANDS LIVE FOREVER.”**

EDWARD TUFTE, BACKER SPIELVOGEL BATES



# FIVE GATES UNLOCKED FOR NEW GROWTH

Each of the Five Gates of Branding can restrict continued brand growth, but if you approach them as an opportunity, you'll find that they are exactly that. Gone are the days when a brand could enjoy continuous growth without careful attention to the five gates, if that time ever existed at all. However, with diligence and an ego-less, realistic view of the brand, **a brand can live forever.**

**“ HALF THE MONEY I SPEND ON ADVERTISING IS WASTED;  
THE TROUBLE IS, I DON’T KNOW WHICH HALF.**

JOHN WANAMAKER, AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN (JULY 11, 1838 – DECEMBER 12, 1922)

We are an inventive agency with full-service experience. Specifically, we focus on repositioning mature brands. We are passionate about restoring value and strength to once-powerful brands.

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