
IMAGE ASSESSMENT - RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

The Importance of Image to the Direction and Success of Organizations

I think we would all agree that knowledge is a fundamental component of success for any organization.

Two points of knowledge that all organizations should possess, but many don't, are:

- 1) The knowledge of the firm's strategic intention – a vision that all employees understand, buy into, and can strive toward...a vision that elicits a sense of discovery, destiny, and direction from all employees.

A firm's strategic intention must be based on its current and prospective core competencies, and these competencies must be perceived by the marketplace.

- 2) The knowledge of how to focus the firm's limited resources to achieve its strategic intention.

This requires that firms have a thorough understanding of their target markets. Selecting these targets, and developing marketing plans and strategies to succeed in them will, in part, be based on the perceived image, strengths, and weaknesses of the firm by these targets.

What the above comments imply is simply that firms need to understand how they're currently perceived in the marketplace in order to navigate effectively and efficiently.

Further, they must have an agreed upon understanding of how they want to be perceived, so that they can address the gap between current and desired images, strengths, and weaknesses.

With this in mind, the following sections of this document address the image assessment process and the research technique(s) that we believe provides the greatest value.

The Image Assessment Process

If ultimately we wish to change certain of our images, we must:

- 1) Know what we want our image to be, and
- 2) Be able to measure the effectiveness of our actions over a period of time.

This implies that a sound image assessment procedure has three components, as follows:

Component I: An Internal Assessment Of Image, Perceptions, Strengths, And Weaknesses

An internal assessment accomplishes several objectives:

- 1) It helps us to ensure that we are measuring attributes, characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses that are important to the organization.
- 2) It brings differences of opinion within the organization to the surface.
- 3) It provides the foundation to address and come to consensus on the firm's desired image.

This component is typically implemented through the use of a self-administered questionnaire, containing both close-ended and open-ended question formats. It may also be completed through one-on-one interviews, depending on the budget constraints of the firm.

It should be completed by all key management personnel and any marketing people responsible for development and/or implementation of marketing strategies.

Component II: An Assessment Of Image And Performance As Perceived By Customers And Prospects

The second component of image assessment is the external portion. That is, assessment by customers, prospects, and other pertinent influencers.

Most companies understand that an organization's image is determined by its history of experiences, its core competencies, and its marketing/communications capabilities.

What often goes overlooked however is the dynamic that takes place in the customers' mind as a result of a firm's competitors' history of experiences, core competencies, and marketing capabilities. In other words, image is a relative concept, based to a significant degree on the actions of competitive firms.

External assessment allows a firm to gain an understanding of its image relative to that of the competition.

This component is best fielded through the telephone interview technique. This technique provides higher response quality than the mail technique, allows greater control over whom actually completes the survey, and is comparably priced.

Component III: Identification Of Gaps In Current Versus Desired Perceptions, And The Identification Of Strategies To Address Them

Component III addresses the actions that should be taken as a result of having conducted the assessment. This step ensures an efficient return on the firm's research investment.

This component is typically fielded through an analysis of findings, followed by a one day planning session aimed at presenting conclusions and identifying corresponding strategies.

Recommended Research Technique

The breadth of questioning that is employed in image assessments is based on the objectives of the client. At the very least, an image assessment will measure the perceived character of the organization based on attributes of importance to the client firm.

The image assessment may also include segments that investigate attitude and awareness, and/or strengths and weaknesses (performance issues).

Because it's important to be able to view changes in perception over a period of time, it's necessary to employ a quantitative research technique that provides measurable data. Further, by employing a quantitative technique we can eliminate much of the subjectivity from our interpretation of the responses given.

For measurement of image attributes specifically, we recommend the use of a "dichotomy chart" or "forced characterization" that forces the respondent to consider two attribute extremes. An example of this technique follows in the box below.

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----------------------------------|
| Regional | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Global |
| Conservative | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Progressive |
| Serving a Few Select Markets | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Serving a Broad Array of Markets |
| Aligning With Specific Sectors | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Maintaining a Neutral Position |
| A Niche Firm | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | A Firm With Broad Capabilities |
| Moderately Priced | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | High - Priced |

In addition to the quantitative line of questioning we recommend the addition of open-ended lines of questioning (qualitative) that allow the researcher to further probe areas of critical significance to the organization. The qualitative interview technique adds a depth of information to the finding that should not be overlooked.

Qualitative lines of questioning can be used as follow-ups to responses given in the “forced characterization” line of questioning.

Additional qualitative questions can be added to the front or back end of the survey. Some examples of qualitative questions are:

“What specific qualities or attributes do you look for in ABC Company and other engineering firms?”

“Based on what you know, how would you characterize ABC Company in meeting your expectations in general?”

Image Assessment: A Tool For the Long Run

As we suggested toward the beginning of this document, assessment of image, strengths, and weaknesses is key to effective strategy development.

As such, it should be incorporated as a core exercise in both the strategic and market planning processes, and should be evaluated periodically and continuously. Image assessment should not be considered a one-time event.

Common applications of image assessment findings include:

- 1) Core competence maintenance and acquisition strategies.
- 2) Development or revision of the organization's strategic architecture.
- 3) Identification of market planning strategies and tactics.
- 4) Development of advertising/communications strategies and tactics.

For further information regarding image assessment please contact Jim McKeen, President, at (330) 688-4002, email to jmckeen@sma-i.com, or access our website at www.strategicmarketingassociates.com.