The Importance of Mapping Out Your Competitor Landscape

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“We don’t have any competitors.”

It’s a line I hear often from clients, and it always gives me pause. It’s technically possible that your brand has carved out a niche so specific — say, a dating app for marine biologists — that you’re literally the only player in that space. The more likely scenario, though, is that you simply haven’t factored in all of the alternatives to using your product or service.

Mapping out this landscape of choices is critical to understanding your market and sharpening your value proposition. I know this, because I work in digital marketing, where competition for attention is always high, and only the most refined messaging gets through. Highlighting your brand’s attributes vis-à-vis direct competitors is relatively straightforward, as we’ll discuss ahead. Standing out from indirect and replacement competitors, though, is much more challenging.

Marketing against direct competitors

Direct competitors to your brand offer more or less the same product or service as you do, and as such, they’re pretty easy to identify. You probably run across their ads in trade publications. You may even hear customers mention them as alternatives to your brand. And if you go to a conference or

expo, they’re probably setting up booths right next to yours.

You and your direct competitors are all fishing in the same pond of customers and competing in the same marketing spheres (think Google Ad, social ads, email outreach). When you’re trying to persuade a customer to choose your brand over a direct competitor’s, you typically focus on differences in features and quality, but the basic appeal remains the same.

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Marketing against indirect competitors

Indirect competitors are brands targeting the exact same audiences as you, but selling products or services that can be thought of as substitutes (rather than replacements) for your offerings. Pizza Hut and Domino’s are direct competitors. Pizza Hut and PF Chang’s are indirect competitors. All of these brands are trying to reach the same market – hungry people ready to eat out – but they’re offering vastly different ways to fulfill that need.

Usually, the biggest difference between indirect competitors is price and quality. An extra large double pepperoni pizza from Domino’s is going to cost a lot less than a family dinner from PF Chang’s. When someone picks Domino’s, they’re indicating that, for one night at least, the complete dining experience one gets at PF Chang’s is less important than simply getting a hot pie to-go or delivered and being done with it.

To win over customers leaning toward an indirect competitor, you need to emphasize how your product or service delivers value beyond a single use and potentially solves problems down the road as well.

One of the ways you make yourself essential to a customer is

by establishing and maintaining a trusting partnership. While it's true that trust accrues naturally over time, you have to start somewhere, and having a thorough understanding of your competition helps you get off on the right foot with new people who don't yet have any reason to believe in you.

Let's say you're meeting with a prospective client, and they mention that a competitor has offered them a cheaper quote for the job they want done. If you've done your homework, you understand how your services stack up against that competitor. This allows you to make an honest and well-informed argument as to precisely how the service *you* are offering will get it done more quickly or comprehensively. You don't have to fall back on cheap sales patter or, even worse, start throwing around promises you might not be able to keep. Then, if you land the client, they know what to expect, you're confident in your ability to deliver, and a trusting partnership begins to take shape. And even if you strike out, they're likely to appreciate your candor and knowledge of the field. Perhaps they'll come back to you for the next job.

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Marketing against replacement competitors

Replacement competitors is a broad category that includes … well, basically every choice that isn't using your product or service.

On social channels, for instance, your company's content floats suspended in a torrent of posts, a small portion of which come from your industry peers. You are trying to grab a potential customer's attention as they scroll through a feed that contains news updates and commentary, pictures of their friends' kids and videos of raccoons stuck in dog doors. You don't have to stand out only against other shops. You have to

stand out against the totality of a customer's interests.

Keeping aware of all these different elements of competition that you're up against may seem like extra work. You got into the business you're in because it has a fundamental appeal, whether that's the products you're selling, the people you deal with or the money it pays. You don't have personal social media, but you need to worry about Twitter and TikTok? You're a mattress manufacturer, but you have to think about how much your customers are paying their accountants? It can be overwhelming, everything you have to consider in order to succeed, but of course, you don't have to know *everything*. You're not going to be able to measure every aspect of competition you face.

But making a concerted effort to do so will pay off. Putting the work in and allocating the resources to try to understand all that you're up against is the key. Because in the end, you are competing against your own complacency, fibs you tell yourself to make necessary tasks seem less important. When you're wiped out at the end of a long week, curiosity can seem like more trouble than it's worth. "We'll be fine." "We don't have any direct competitors." Meanwhile you're falling behind, whether you know it or not.

The only way to overcome competition is to embrace it – to reject your own laziness and insecurity. When I hear clients tell me about their lack of competition, I know it's probably because they think the presence of competition suggests that there's a *problem* with their process or execution. That's not true at all! No matter the quality of the job you're doing, you will always have plenty of competition. It's everywhere, and it's inevitable. A fuller knowledge of your competition is the best chance you've got to succeed. Anything less is just magical thinking.

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