Adgen.

The Challenger's Advantage

DIFFERENCE OVER SPEND

Why Brand Divergence Matters

For decades, marketers have relied on the same set of metrics to understand brand performance. For universities specifically, the more divergent a brand is, the more enrollments they get.

Awareness. Consideration.

Preference. Recommendation.

These measures remain important. They help us understand how many people know a brand, how many would consider it, and how likely they are to choose it.

But they don't tell the whole story.

If awareness alone drove growth, the biggest brands would continue to dominate indefinitely. Yet across almost every category, smaller brands continue to gain share, disrupt established competitors and command premium pricing despite having fewer resources and lower levels of recognition.

Why?

Because growth is not driven by visibility alone. It is driven by the combination of attraction and difference. The brands that outperform their category do more than stand out. They create meaningful distance between themselves and competitors, while building genuine pull with consumers including students. They stand for something distinct, and they are chosen because of it.

Get in touch.

To learn more about where your institution sits in our BDI index and how you can outsmart over outspend your competitors, get in touch.

Difference gives consumers a reason to notice a brand. Attraction gives them a reason to choose it. The brands that grow are those that achieve both, creating separation in the market and demand in equal measure. In other words, they diverge.

The challenge is that divergence is surprisingly difficult to measure. Most brand tracking programmes are designed to understand scale and salience and are often built with category leaders in mind.

They can tell you whether people know your brand and whether they might consider it. What they often struggle to reveal is whether your brand is becoming more distinctive, more compelling, and more capable of creating competitive advantage.

This raises an important question:

How do you measure whether your brand is genuinely standing apart from the market and market value share?

That question led us to develop the Brand Divergence Index.

Difference

Deviant brands Small or niche challengers, perhaps perceive as so different or niche applying to them is risky. Opportunity: Amplify the aspects of Difference driving Attraction - ditch the rest.	**Divergent brands** Perceived as different (in a good way) to the HE category with great marketing performance. Opportunity: Small optimisations of underlying metrics to continually beat the competition.
Default brands Not spending or standing out enough to attract students to apply. Opportunity: Outthink across the board to drive Attraction AND Difference.	**Convergent brands** Category leaders, following conventions and often winning by outspending. Opportunity: Amplify Difference to improve marketing effectiveness.

Attraction

Introducing the Brand Divergence Index

The Brand Divergence Index (BDI) is a research framework designed to measure something traditional brand trackers often overlook:

The combination of attraction and difference.

Attraction reflects the strength of a brand's pull. It captures the extent to which consumers feel positively towards a brand, would recommend it, seek it out, and miss it if it disappeared.

Difference reflects the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as distinct from others in the category. Not different because the brand says it is, but different because consumers genuinely experience it that way.

Together, these two dimensions provide a more complete picture of brand strength.

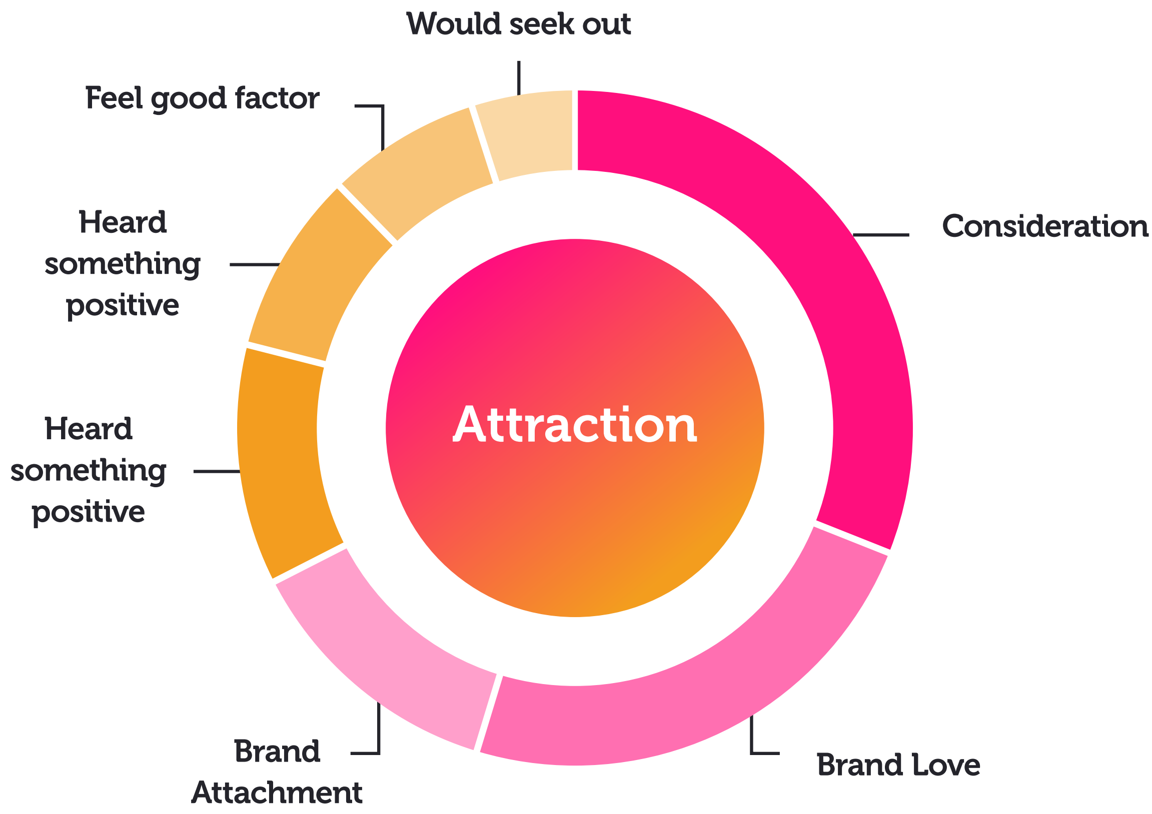
A brand that attracts consumers but lacks distinction may be well-liked, yet vulnerable to competitors offering similar products or lower prices.

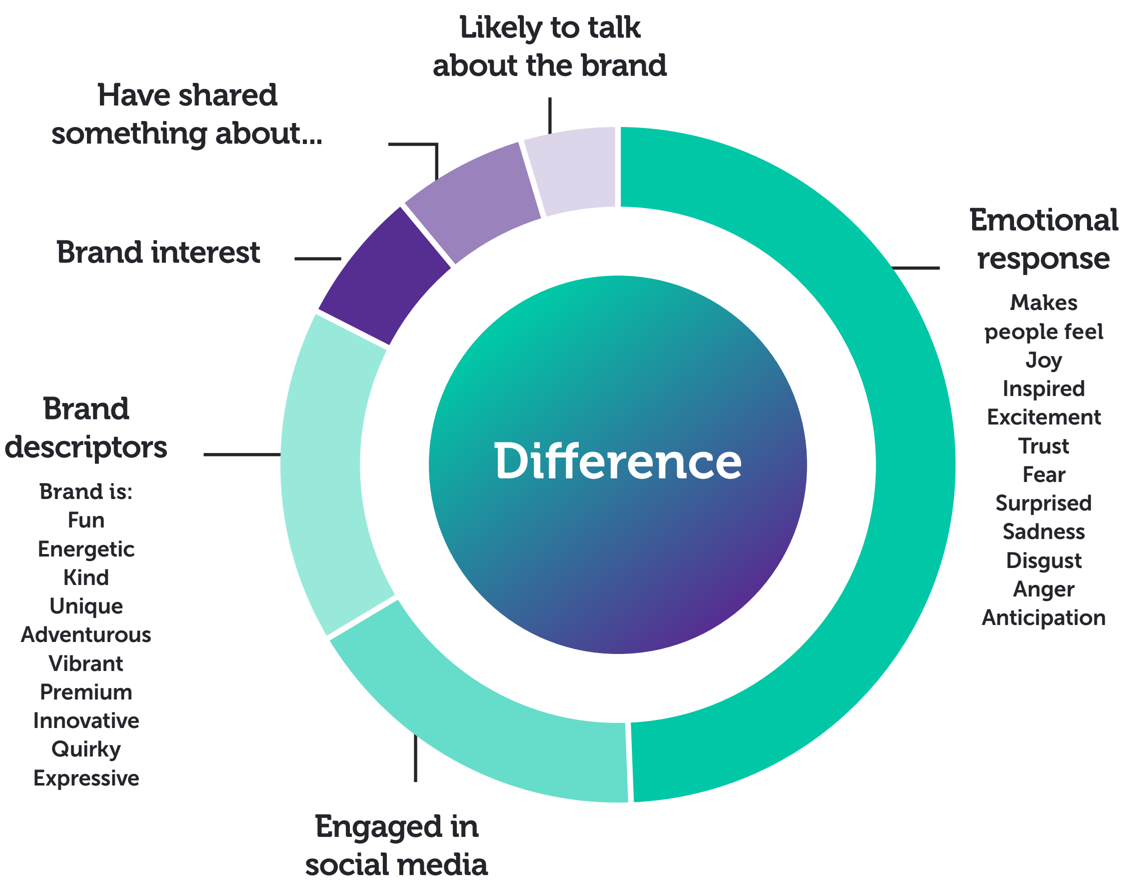
A brand that is highly distinctive but lacks attraction may stand out, but struggle to convert attention into demand.

The strongest brands achieve both.

The Brand Divergence Index provides a simple way to understand where your brand sits today, how it compares with competitors, and where the greatest opportunities for growth exist, whilst directly correlating with market value share.

Mapping brands using BDI





The Four Positions of Brand Divergence

Every brand occupies one of four broad positions.

1

The Divergent Brand

High Attraction + High Difference

Consumers are drawn to the brand and see it as meaningfully different from competitors. This is the position most closely associated with sustainable growth and pricing power.

2

The Default Brand

High Attraction + Low Difference

Consumers like the brand, but struggle to identify what makes it unique. Growth may rely heavily on scale, distribution or promotional activity.

3

The Deviant Brand

Low Attraction + High Difference

Consumers recognise the brand as different, but that difference has not yet translated into broad appeal or demand. Often a sign of untapped potential.

4

The Convergent Brand

Low Attraction + Low Difference

Consumers neither feel strongly about the brand nor perceive it as distinctive. This position often signals the need for a clearer proposition and stronger market presence.

What BDI Reveals

Most brand tracking programmes answer questions about visibility. The Brand Divergence Index is designed to answer questions about competitive advantage. By measuring both Attraction and Difference, BDI helps brands understand not just how they are performing, but why.

Your True Competitive Position

BDI shows where your brand sits relative to competitors on both dimensions. This often reveals a very different picture from traditional brand metrics. A market leader may dominate on awareness and consideration yet score relatively low on perceived difference.
A smaller competitor may have lower visibility but a much stronger claim to distinctiveness.

Understanding this balance provides a clearer view of where future growth is likely to come from.

Where Your Brand Is Strongest

Brand performance is rarely consistent across every audience.

BDI can be analysed by demographic, behavioural and customer segments, helping brands understand where attraction and difference are strongest. This can uncover valuable opportunities.
A brand may discover that its positioning resonates particularly strongly with younger consumers, higher-value customers or specific regions, creating opportunities for more focused investment and messaging.

Where Competitors Are Vulnerable

One of the most valuable aspects of BDI is that it benchmarks brands against their competitive set. This means you are not simply measuring your own performance in isolation. You are understanding how consumers perceive every major player in the category.

The results often reveal opportunities that conventional tracking overlooks. Established brands can achieve high levels of attraction through scale and familiarity while becoming increasingly interchangeable in the minds of consumers.

For challenger brands, these gaps often represent opportunities for differentiation and growth
Whether your positioning is landing, every brand has a story it wants consumers to believe.

Innovative. **Premium.** **Sustainable.** **Trusted.** **Accessible.**

The important question is whether consumers see the brand in the same way.

BDI helps bridge the gap between internal strategy and external perception. By combining divergence scores with emotional and implicit brand associations, it provides evidence of whether a positioning strategy is genuinely taking hold.

Whether Momentum Is Building

Brand building is rarely linear.

For categories tracked over multiple waves, BDI provides a way to monitor changes in attraction and difference over time.

This allows marketers to evaluate the impact of campaigns, repositioning programmes, product launches and wider business changes, helping distinguish between short-term fluctuations and meaningful shifts in brand strength.

Brand How BDI is Measured

The Brand Divergence Index is built on large-scale consumer research conducted among people who actively participate in the category being studied.

Rather than measuring opinions among the general population, BDI focuses on the consumers who matter most: those who are aware of, engage with and purchase within the category.

Research is conducted using nationally representative samples, typically ranging from 5,000 to 11,000 respondents per category. All findings are tested to a 95% confidence level, ensuring that reported differences are statistically significant and not the result of random variation.

Attraction Measures

The Attraction Index combines a range of indicators that capture the strength of a brand's pull, including:

- Familiarity and awareness
- Consideration
- Likelihood to recommend
- Likelihood to talk about
- Emotional connection
- Perceived indispensability
- Willingness to purchase

Together, these measures provide a holistic view of how strongly consumers are drawn towards a brand.

Difference Measures

The Difference Index focuses on one of the most important questions in modern marketing:

Do consumers genuinely perceive this brand as different from its competitors?

This measure captures perceived distinctiveness directly, allowing brands to understand whether their positioning is creating meaningful separation within the category.

Beyond the Index

Alongside Attraction and Difference scores, BDI also captures a broader set of diagnostic measures, including:

- **Implicit (System 1) brand associations**
- **Emotional associations**
- **Recent brand visibility**
- **Positive and negative brand experiences**
- **Brand engagement behaviours**

These additional layers of insight help explain the drivers behind the headline scores and identify opportunities for future growth.

Brand Divergence in Practice

Consider a mid-sized brand operating in a category dominated by several established competitors. Its leadership team believes the brand stands apart. Marketing investment has focused on creating a distinctive identity, a clear proposition and a recognisable point of view.

Yet traditional brand tracking suggests limited progress.

Awareness remains significantly lower than the category leaders. Consideration scores are improving only gradually. On the surface, the brand appears to be struggling to close the gap.

BDI tells a different story.

The research reveals that while the brand lags competitors on Attraction, it significantly outperforms them on Difference. Consumers who know the brand recognise it as distinct. They understand what makes it different. They see qualities that competitors lack.

Meanwhile, several larger competitors achieve strong Attraction scores but relatively weak Difference scores. They are familiar, trusted and widely considered, but increasingly difficult for consumers to distinguish from one another.

This changes the strategic conversation.

Rather than attempting to match competitors on scale alone, the brand can build on its existing advantage. It can focus investment on audiences where divergence is strongest, strengthen the connection between difference and demand, and track whether its distinctiveness continues to translate into greater attraction over time.

The result is a more informed approach to brand building and a clearer understanding of where future growth will come from.

Categories We Track

BDI is already available across a growing range of categories, with additional sectors being added on an ongoing basis. **Current categories include:**

- Banking & Saving
- Holidays
- Ready Meals
- Spirits
- Televisions
- Insurance
- Health Insurance
- Premium Snacks
- Education
- Power Tools
- Hair Care
- Garden Equipment

Several categories are tracked across multiple waves, enabling trend analysis and long-term performance monitoring.

A bespoke BDI study can be commissioned using your chosen competitive set and market definition.

A Different Way to Think About Brand Growth

The Difference Index focuses on one of the most important questions in modern marketing:
The strongest brands are not always the most visible.

They are the brands that create meaningful difference, build genuine attraction and establish a position that competitors struggle to replicate.

Understanding that balance is increasingly important in categories where consumers have more choice than ever before.

The Brand Divergence Index was developed to help marketers understand not simply how well known their brand is, but how strongly it stands apart.

Because sustainable growth is rarely driven by awareness alone.

It is driven by the ability to create distance between your brand and everything else in the market.

About Adgen

Adgen is a specialist media agency dedicated to helping higher education institutions attract, engage and convert prospective students through smarter media strategy.

Part of Audience Collective, a group of specialist agencies spanning media, insight, strategy, creative and technology, Adgen combines sector expertise with data-driven thinking to help universities make more effective marketing decisions.

The Brand Divergence Index forms part of our commitment to helping institutions better understand how they are perceived within an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

By combining robust audience research with strategic expertise, BDI provides universities with a clearer view of their competitive position, the strength of their brand, and the opportunities that exist within their market.

Whether you're looking to assess brand differentiation, understand changing student perceptions, benchmark against competitors, or identify new recruitment opportunities, BDI offers a fresh perspective on one of higher education marketing's most important questions: how distinct is your institution in the minds of prospective students?

Get in touch.

To learn more about where your institution sits in our BDI index and how you can outsmart over outspend your competitors, get in touch.

Learn More

To discuss existing category data, bespoke research opportunities, or how Brand Divergence Index insights could support your organisation, get in touch.

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