Marketing Doctor

Marketing Check-up

BlackBerry

As of March 25, 2025

Condition: Stable

The name outlived the phone

In 2009 BlackBerry phones made up nearly one in five smartphones sold worldwide. Today the company makes no phones at all. It is a smaller software business built on QNX, the operating system inside millions of cars, and on secure communications for governments. This check-up looks at the marketing decisions behind the fall of the phone and what the famous name has to carry now.

Key takeaways

- BlackBerry built its brand with businesses and governments. The iPhone shifted the buying decision to the people holding the phone, who cared less about battery life and security.
- Its answers, the Storm touchscreen and BlackBerry 10, arrived late, by about two years in observers' view.
- In 2013 the company renamed itself after its phone. In 2016 it stopped designing phones, so the company carried the name of a product it no longer made.
- Its future now rests on carmakers and governments: QNX runs in more than 255 million vehicles. That is a business-to-business marketing job, where proof matters more than fame.

Marketing health check

Area	Finding
Original product	Gone. BlackBerry stopped designing phones in 2016.
Buyer	Changed. From people holding phones to carmakers and governments.
Story	Shifting. Phones, then security software, now cars and government.
Name	Famous, but tied to a product it no longer makes.
Proof points	Strong in its niches. QNX runs in more than 255 million vehicles.

Timeline

When	What happened
Early 2007	Co-founder Mike Lazaridis sees the iPhone on television.
2009	BlackBerry holds 19.9% of worldwide smartphone sales, ahead of Apple.
2008 to 2009	The Storm touchscreen phone fails to become the Apple-killer carriers wanted.
Jan 30, 2013	BlackBerry 10 launches and Research In Motion renames itself BlackBerry.
Sep 2013	A large write-down on unsold phones and 4,500 job cuts.
Sep 2016	BlackBerry stops designing its own phones.
Late 2016	BlackBerry's share of smartphone sales reaches 0.0%.
2018	BlackBerry agrees to buy security firm Cylance.
Feb 2025	The sale of Cylance closes. QNX and secure communications remain.

What happened: the buyer changed

Research In Motion built its brand with businesses and governments, which The Globe and Mail called its "most loyal base of customers." In 2009 BlackBerry still held 19.9% of worldwide smartphone sales, ahead of Apple at 14.4%. But the iPhone changed who made the choice. Co-founder Mike Lazaridis later recalled telling his staff: "If that thing catches on, we're competing with a Mac, not a Nokia."

The BlackBerry had a clear job: keep busy professionals on top of email. The iPhone was hired for a bigger job, and the people holding the phone started to decide. As the Globe put it, “consumers didn’t care so much about battery life or security features.” This is the classic jobs to be done miss: the customer’s job grew, and the product kept serving the old one.

The diagnosis: late answers and a borrowed name

- **It watched the wrong buyer.** IT departments paid for BlackBerrys, but employees increasingly chose what they wanted to carry.
- **Answers came late.** The Storm failed to give Verizon the “Apple-killer it coveted,” and observers judged the first BlackBerry 10 phones two years too late.
- **The company took the product’s name.** On January 30, 2013, RIM renamed itself BlackBerry. Three years later it stopped designing phones.
- **A story that kept changing.** Phones, then security software, then cars and government. Each turn asks buyers to relearn what BlackBerry is for, and clear positioning needs a story that outlasts one deal.

The treatment: a business-to-business brand

In September 2016 BlackBerry stopped designing its own phones and licensed its brand to partners. In 2018 it bet on security software, agreeing to buy Cylance, then sold it in a deal that closed in February 2025.

What remains is focused. QNX software runs in more than 255 million vehicles, and the Secure Communications division serves large government customers. These buyers are carmakers and governments, so this is a B2B marketing task: proof, references and long sales cycles count for more than fame.

The result: a famous name on a different business

By the last quarter of 2016, Gartner put the BlackBerry operating system’s share of smartphone sales at 0.0%, down from nearly one in five in 2009. The company kept the name, and the name kept its fame. Most people still picture a phone with a keyboard, not software inside a car.

Lessons for your marketing

1. Watch who makes the buying decision, not only who pays the invoice.
2. When the customer's job grows, grow the product with it, before a rival does.
3. Name the company for what it will still do in ten years, not for its best-selling product.
4. Treat each acquisition as a promise to customers about who you are. Reversing it costs more than the price.
5. In business-to-business markets, proof and references build the brand more than fame does.

The doctor will see you now.

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Sources

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