



Final Research Report

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IMC 604: Marketing Communications Research

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Contents

Introduction	3
Research Highlights	3
Methods and Activities	4
Users and Recruitment.....	5
Research Findings	5
Recommendations and Next Steps.....	7
References.....	9
Appendix	10

Introduction

Our EMU Marketing Communications Research team was partnered with Ann Arbor SPARK for the IMC 604 course company project. Our team consisted of graduate students Matheus Arnaut, Heather Dawkins, Rachel Hostinsky, Jennier Kennedy, and Courtney White. Our company contact was SPARK Director, Kristine Nash Wong.

Ann Arbor SPARK provides resources and education for entrepreneurs seeking to start or grow a start-up in the field of technology, mobility, and healthcare. They provide a wide range of entrepreneurial services including Entrepreneur Bootcamp, Startup Acceleration, Incubator Programs, Coaching and Mentorships, and Educational Programs all designed to help grow and scale their client businesses. (SPARK, 2022)

Through email introductions by company contact Kristine, we were given SPARK client contacts to engage with and conduct phone or online interviews. These interviews consisted of a qualitative and quantitative questionnaire, the details and findings of which are provided in subsequent areas of the report.

Our project research was conducted to help SPARK gain a better understanding of the entrepreneurial client perspective and their experience of working with SPARK. The research focused on SPARK's onboarding process, educational resources, entrepreneurial services, and employee support. SPARK is eager to learn where there may be gaps in any of these processes, where there could be improvements, and what programs and processes are working well for their clients.

Research Highlights

By implementing a qualitative survey within our research tools and tactics, we found a few significant themes emerged from SPARK's clientele. While 68% of SPARK's customer base enjoyed their overall customer experience, there were four suggested areas of improvement.

On-Boarding: On average, 58% of SPARK's clients feel that their on-boarding experience could have been improved.

Personal Interactions: On average, 33% of SPARK's clients feel that their personal interactions with the company's point-of-contacts could be improved. That includes their initial interactions during the on-boarding process to being assigned a formal point-of-contact/mentor.

Marketing & Company Offerings: On average, 29% of SPARK's clients feel the company's internal and external marketing options could be improved. From SPARK's social media engagement to marketing packages designed for clients, there is a need for more choices and support in this area.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion: On average, 29% of SPARK's clients feel that diversity, equity & inclusion is not a major focus for the company. Through our interviews, clients didn't note the lack of diversity, equity & inclusion but expressed concern that there should be more opportunities for women and minority programming.

These key findings from our survey research and analysis of Ann Arbor SPARK supported the team's initial examination of the company through a prepared SWOT analysis. See **Figure 1** in the Appendix. The company's lack of information, low social media engagement, and available marketing services coincide with their clients' suggestions to improve their weaknesses and opportunities.

Another exciting highlight while conducting the interviews was an emotional shift during the customer journey. Initially, we perceived less frustration during the on-boarding experience, and through our discussions with the clientele, we recognized less satisfaction through that process.

Methods and Activities

The methods and activities that took place within our EMU team started with a weekly Zoom meeting set up with our Ann Arbor SPARK contact, Kristine. This started us off on the right foot, giving us inside information about the company and exactly what types of services they offer. These meetings took place on Wednesday mornings and lasted thirty to forty-five minutes. As the weeks went on, our meetings with Kristine consisted of our plans of execution for the upcoming assignment, and listening to any potential ideas or feedback she may have in order to shift us in the right direction regarding our work with SPARK.

Our team also decided to meet via Google Meet twice a week, outside of our meetings with Kristine, to organize, strategize, divide tasks, and discuss any findings, topics, ideas, or questions that may have been lingering. These meetings took place on Monday mornings, and during this time we would discuss the upcoming week's assignments. We also met on Thursday mornings to discuss the work we completed over the past few days and talk about any potential changes that needed to be made to any of our portions before our submissions on Friday. Both of these weekly meetings lasted for forty-five minutes to one hour. This was essential and worked well for the team, considering there were five of us, and the organization and division of tasks was important in order to stay on top of the workload and tight deadlines.

Based on our research and conversations with each other, our team was able to create an ideal SPARK customer persona, a SPARK Customer Journey Map, SPARK Competitive Landscape, and a Detailed Competitor List. See **Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4, and Figure 5** in the appendix. Each of these formats helped us understand, put into perspective, and visualize exactly what type of company SPARK is, their customer processes, and the types of competitors that they have.

A business networking event in Ypsilanti was attended by one of our team members. Our representative from SPARK, Kristine, was in attendance as well. This gave the individual from our team the opportunity to meet Kristine in person, which was a great advantage for us. The team member that attended this event made her way around the room, speaking and networking with other various company representatives who were also in attendance. This gave her the chance to see if any of those companies utilized SPARK and their services. If they did, our team members continued the conversation with them, and gained more insight on SPARK's overall performance.

Users and Recruitment

In order to gain varied insight and information, our team knew it was imperative to reach out to as many client contacts as possible. Our company contact Kristine initially reached out to 15 SPARK clients via introductory email to gauge interest in participating in our project. She explained that we were EMU graduate students conducting an interview style questionnaire to help SPARK better understand the client experience. In Kristine's words in the emails, "Without this feedback we are creating (and continuing) programs and services in a void. We are in dire need of our own customer discovery!" The initial response from clients was encouraging but due to inability to connect or scheduling conflicts, we asked Kristine to reach out to five more clients.

Our team decided on a questionnaire that asked quantitative questions with follow-up qualitative questions. By having the clients numerically rate SPARK's processes and programs, we were then able to ask why they gave each rating.

"Qualitative and quantitative market research approaches are designed to give you very different perspectives, even if you are using them with the same audience. Qualitative research gives you rich, detailed, and often emotionally driven insights based off the personal views of those you interview – for example, what do people feel about your product? In contrast, quantitative surveys give you a broader, full view, based on hard statistics – i.e., what percentage of people like or dislike your product" (Osbaldston, 2022).

We also decided that an online or phone interview would provide us with the best information possible since tone and inflection gets lost in text or form survey format. We did however create a Google form survey of our questionnaire to offer to any clients who felt more comfortable sharing their experiences that format or simply did not have time for a call. See SPARK Client Questionnaire, **Figure 6** in the appendix.

We created a color coded spreadsheet with all client information: company name, contact name, email, phone number (if available), and if the interview was completed. Client names and contact info have been redacted for client anonymity. See **Figure 7** in the appendix. Our plan was to divide and conquer, assigning each team member three clients to reach out to via email. Once we received a response from them, we set up a date and time for whatever meeting format the client preferred. Total interview time varied between clients as some were more eager than others to provide more in depth answers and explanations.

Research Findings

As stated above, our team reached out and engaged either through online surveys, scheduled zooms, or phone calls with past/present clients of SPARK. Our survey consisted of 15 questions and the survey took approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. The quantitative questions rated SPARK on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being below average and 5 surpassing expectations. Through our team's conducted and completed surveys, we were able to narrow down the things that SPARK exceeds at

and should continue to implement. We also found some areas SPARK could improve, helping to ensure a seamless overall experience at SPARK. See **Figure 8** survey findings graph in the Appendix.

The areas where SPARK clients spoke highly:

- The staff was very friendly and welcoming
- The start-up funding was at the top of most clients' feedback, as they expressed their gratitude for being awarded
- The SPARK boot camp process, clients mentioned learning tools they could use not only in their business, but also through life
- The marketing intern program with EMU; clients that took part in this program seemed to really enjoy the kickbacks as they learned a lot with regards to marketing

The areas SPARK clients feel could help the overall SPARK experience:

- Faster on-boarding process
- More clear and knowledgeable point of contact and staff
- More of a social media presence
- Create follow-up plan for clients after SPARK, while receiving feedback about services rendered from clients
- Less restrictive with allocating funding to clients
- Offer a branding package for start-up businesses
- Incorporate company and community DEI trainings or engagements

Opportunities

1. Based on the way we all communicate presently, the best way to reach an audience of prospective clients or a target market is through computers or smartphones. Engagement through social media is prominent through platforms such as Indeed, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. These platforms are excellent opportunities for SPARK's community engagement and to reach out to new business owners in need of SPARK entrepreneurial services.
2. Offering marketing services to start-up businesses, including branding and logos, can help the achievement and overall outcome of the clients' success rate.
3. In the business world they say, "Time is Money". With that said, constructing and implementing a quicker and more seamless on-boarding approach with set days/time to:
 - a. Meet with mentors
 - b. Go over goals and create a plan to execute
 - c. Consistently follow up with clients to ensure client is happy and all questions have been answered
4. With SPARK being an entrepreneurial community resource, engaging with the business community is very important. Another way to bring new clients into SPARK is by offering a mentorship program of some sort, or an in-person/online Q & A with guest speakers in the same field of running and maintaining a business. This would allow SPARK clients/business owners to pick the brain of the speaker and get a feel or grasp on a question or experience the client may have had.

See overall client suggested improvement areas, **Figure 9** in the Appendix.

Recommendations and Next Steps

- We recommend that SPARK streamline their onboarding process, and make it less tiresome and slow for startups, by providing clear instructions and easy-to-follow guidelines that can help startups get up and running more expediently.
- SPARK should consider providing consistent follow-up after the initial meeting to address any concerns or questions; some clients we interviewed mentioned that there were too many meetings and a high number of messages, making them feel overwhelmed. We recommend that SPARK balances communication, ensuring that clients receive only essential information.
- Startups may not always know what they need, so SPARK should provide more details about the resources available to them. This will include regularly sharing updates on new funding opportunities, networking events, and training programs.
- Although most clients feel that SPARK is very inclusive, some expressed a desire for more diversity among their employees. We recommend that SPARK implement measures to promote diversity, such as inclusive hiring practices and providing cultural awareness training to employees.
- Some startups found the restrictions on funding usage to be very high, so we recommend that SPARK increases flexibility for businesses to use funding according to their unique needs.
- SPARK should increase their social media presence to engage with clients and promote its events and resources.

The overall feedback we got from clients suggests that SPARK is doing a great job facilitating growth for startups, and its clients have a very positive partnership with the organization. By implementing our recommendations, SPARK will continue to enhance its services and support for startups while maintaining an increased level of customer satisfaction.

The next step for SPARK should be to focus on promoting the resources they have available, both online and offline. This will help startups learn about the support and resources available to them. We suggest incorporating funds for legal fees to help startups in the long term. Additionally, if they provide more funds for marketing spending to help startups advertise their products and services, we believe they would see increased client satisfaction.

Third, SPARK should increase human interaction on social channels to help startups learn better and feel more engaged with the SPARK community, while ensuring that speakers who provide their contact information during lectures and seminars are followed up promptly on social channels to maintain valuable mentorship opportunities.

By implementing these suggestions, we believe that SPARK will better support business startups and expansions in their journey to success and create more efficient and effective programs.

Next steps as a team:

1. Enlist clients at the initial alignment meeting for better long-term engagement: The team should explain the importance of client involvement throughout the

- entire survey process. The team should encourage the client to provide feedback and participate in the survey design process. This will help to ensure that the client is invested in the survey and will be more likely to engage with the results.
2. Work with the client to find a better variety of participants for more diversity in the survey: The team should work with the client to identify a broader range of potential participants for the survey. This will help ensure that the survey results are representative of a diverse group of people which will provide more valuable insights.
 3. Focus on 1-2 objectives instead of 3-4: This will allow the team to focus on getting more in-depth responses to these objectives, which will ultimately provide more valuable insight.
 4. Create fewer complex questions: The team should work on simplifying the survey questions to make them easier for participants to understand. This will help ensure that participants are providing accurate and valuable responses.
 5. Schedule more than one teammate for each interview to encourage more open discussion from the client: The team should consider having multiple team members attend each interview. This will help ensure that the client feels more comfortable and will be more likely to share their thoughts and opinions.
 6. Find more time to connect with team members throughout the interview process to track more details of emerging themes: The team should make sure to schedule regular check-ins to discuss emerging themes and insights from the survey. This will help ensure that everyone on the team is on the same page and that the survey is on track to provide valuable feedback.

By implementing these next steps, the team can improve the quality of the survey and increase the likelihood of obtaining more valuable insights.

References

Ann Arbor SPARK. (2022, September 9). *Economic Development Services & Resources*. <https://annarborusa.org/Links to an external site.>

Osbaldeston, A. (2022, November 28). *5 reasons to combine qualitative and quantitative research*. Questback. Retrieved February 3, 2023, from <https://www.questback.com/blog/5-reasons-to-combine-qualitative-and-quantitative-research/>

Appendix

Figure 1

Ann Arbor SPARK SWOT Analysis


		Positive	Negative
Internal Factors	Strengths <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Funding and resources are valuable 2. Good customer morale and brand reputation 3. Excellent programming, specifically the Boot Camp 4. Responds quickly to customer's questions 	Weaknesses <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Slow onboarding experience 2. Lack of information 3. Lack of diversity amongst company 4. Low social media engagement 5. Funding is very restrictive on how customers utilize the money they receive 	
	External Factors	Opportunities <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engagement on social platforms 2. Available marketing services 3. Less meetings, more action 4. More mentorships and interaction from event speakers 	Threats <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Decrease in helpful staffing 2. Better networking events in the area 3. Competitive startups with faster turn-around time 4. Loss of state monies to the fund their client's startups

Figure 2

SPARK Customer Persona



Brandy Johnston

Job: Brandy is the owner and App Developer for a company called "Just App It". She's involved in "Just App It" app testing and occasional software updates in order to keep the apps running smoothly.

Age: 43

Gender: Female

Skills: Brandy excels at thinking 'outside the box' while fixing customer issues in relation to the apps that her company provides. She has 20 years of customer service experience, giving her the ability to work with a wide range of personalities and clients. Brandy is very tech savvy and knowledgeable when it comes to anything tech-related.

Goals: Brandy would like to grow "Just App It" into a 5 million dollar business within 3 years.

Background: Brandy has a Master's Degree in Software Engineering completed April of 2020. After completing her Master's Degree, she started a minority owned online business, creating custom apps for businesses in her local area.

Brandy is married, wife of 20 years. Also, a mother to a 16 year old boy and a 17 year old girl. She lives in the suburbs and enjoys quiet and relaxing "me" time on weekends. She attends church every Wednesday and Sunday.

Brandy enjoys putting together fashionable and chic outfits for work, and accessorizes with different and unique frames to her glasses. She drives a black Chevy Blazer. She mainly uses Apple products for her personal use, but understands how Samsung and Google products would interact with the apps her company provides (as mentioned above, she is very tech savvy).

Brandy is preparing her kids for their upcoming college careers.

Figure 3
SPARK Customer Journey Map

ANN ARBOR SPARK	Awareness Stage	Consideration Stage	Decision Stage	Service Stage	Loyalty Stage	Emotions
What is the customer thinking/feeling?	Customer is in need of assistance in growing their business	Customer considers reaching out to outside resources for assistance in growing their business	Customer decides to reach out to outside sources for assistance in growing their business	Customer feels apprehensive about Ann Arbor SPARK's services and if they will work in helping the growth of their business	Customer feels satisfied with Ann Arbor SPARK's services in assisting their business to grow	
What is the customer's action?	Customer reaches out to Ann Arbor SPARK in order to help grow their business	Customer considers Ann Arbor SPARK's recommended services in order to help grow their business	Customer decides to commit to using Ann Arbor SPARK's services in order to help grow their business	Customer receives Ann Arbor SPARK's service and analyzes if they are satisfied or not	Customer recommends Ann Arbor SPARK to other small business owners / Customer leaves positive online reviews about Ann Arbor SPARK	
What/where is the buyer researching?	Customer researches Ann Arbor SPARK online to see exactly how successful Ann Arbor SPARK can be in assisting in growing their business	Customer considers Ann Arbor SPARK over other companies that offer the same or similar services of helping businesses grow	Customer is researching Ann Arbor SPARK and thier services on their website	Customer can keep contact with Ann Arbor SPARK during the implementation process via email, phone calls, in-person meetings	Customer can share positive feedback about Ann Arbor SPARK via word of mouth, social media, review websites, etc.	
How will the buyer move along their journey with SPARK in mind?	Customer observes and is pleased with Ann Arbor SPARK's services in assisting in growing their business	Customer considers recommending Ann Arbor SPARK to other small business owners who might need help growing their businesses	Customer decides on recommending Ann Arbor SPARK to other small business owners due to how helpful their services were in helping grow their business	Customer can follow Ann Arbor SPARK on various forms of social media	Customer will remember their positive experience with Ann Arbor SPARK and feel comfortable referring back to them if needed	

Figure 4
SPARK Competitive Landscape

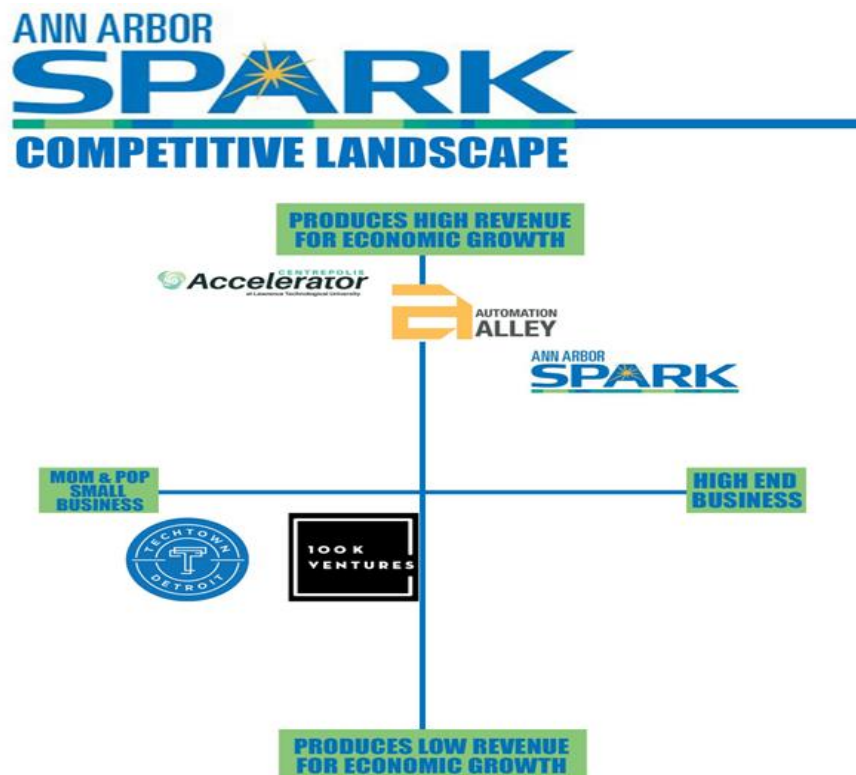


Figure 5

Detailed Competitor List

Competitor 1: Automation Alley

Website: <https://www.automationalley.com>

Location: Troy, MI

Revenue (Per year): \$7.5 Million

Founded: Founded in 1999

Employees: <25 employees

Mission: Facilitate public-private partnerships, connecting industry, education and government to help businesses succeed by navigating the challenges of digital transformation

Field/ Target market: Manufacturing and high-tech industries.

Services: Provide resources, funding, and intelligence to help members grow and prosper in a digital age.

Competitor 2: Centrepolis Accelerator

Website: <https://www.centrepolisaccelerator.com>

Location: Based in Southfield, MI

Revenue (Per year): \$10 Million

Founded: Founded in 2017

Employees: 500-1000 Employees

Mission: Fuel the growth of Southeast Michigan's small manufacturers and hardware entrepreneurs

Field/ Target market: Small manufacturers and hardware entrepreneurs

Services: Provides access to key resources including mentors, workshops, cutting-edge technologies, corporate connections, student & faculty engagement, events, workspace, and a community of peers.

Competitor 3: 100K Ventures

Website: <https://100kventures.org>

Location: Based in Flint, MI

Revenue (Per year): <\$5 million

Founded: Founded in Dec 2018

Employees: <50 employees

Mission: 100K Ventures invests in early-stage companies, to help passionate innovators create products, services, and startups of their own through mentorship.

Field/ Target market: Early-stage companies across all industries who receive a high assessment from the 100K Ideas pipeline.

Services: Provides a helping hand with problems clients are trying to solve, propose solutions, and where they might bump into existing patents or products.

Figure 6

Client interview questionnaire



Guided Qualitative Interview & Final Survey

Name of Client:

Name of Team Member Leading Interview:

Date of Interview:

Interview Opener

Let me start by saying thank you for participating in this survey. I know schedules are busy, so we appreciate you taking the time to connect with us. To give you some background on this survey – Ann Arbor SPARK is looking to improve some of its customer experience processes. Our Marketing class at Eastern Michigan University has teamed up with them to help provide a better qualitative survey to gain a better perspective. This conversation will be anonymous. We want you to feel open to discussing any areas you believe SPARK could improve. Your transparency will provide us with the best feedback and possible solutions for SPARK. If there are any areas of improvement we don't touch on, please don't hesitate to offer your own thinking.

Interview Begins

1. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your role?
2. What brought you to SPARK, and how long have you been utilizing their services?

Onboarding

3. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being "surpasses expectation") - how would you rate SPARK's onboarding experience?

1 Below Average **2** Average **3** Good **4** Excellent **5** Surpasses Expectations

Question - Onboarding				
1	2	3	4	5

Did you find their onboarding staff helpful? Was your account manager helpful?

4. Overall, what was your biggest frustration with the onboarding process

Personal Interaction

5. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being “surpasses expectation”) - how would you rate SPARK’s personal interaction experience?

1 Below Average 2 Average 3 Good 4 Excellent 5 Surpasses Expectations

Question – Personal Interaction				
1	2	3	4	5

6. How often are you in contact with your account manager and/or have a personal interaction with a team member from SPARK?
7. Overall, what is your biggest frustration with SPARK’s interaction?

Marketing and Company Offerings

8. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being “surpasses expectation”) - how would you rate SPARK’s marketing and their company offerings to further your business?

1 Below Average 2 Average 3 Good 4 Excellent 5 Surpasses Expectations

Question – Marketing and Company Offerings				
1	2	3	4	5

9. Which services are you currently using with SPARK and/or what are services that you’d like to tap into?
10. Do you attend the offered workshops and events? Do you find these to be successful and/or are there ways they could be more helpful?

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

11. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being “surpasses expectation”) – how would you rate SPARK’s DEI Opportunities?

1 Below Average 2 Average 3 Good 4 Excellent 5 Surpasses Expectations

Question – DEI Opportunities				
1	2	3	4	5

12. How inclusive do you find SPARK to be in its programming and other diversity, equity, and inclusion offerings?

Wrapping it Up

13. If you could do it over (choosing Ann Arbor Spark to help your business) would you? Why or why not?

14. Yes or No – would you recommend SPARK’s services to others looking to further their businesses?

YES

NO

Figure 7

Client Contact Spreadsheet

<u>Company</u>	<u>Contact Name</u>	<u>Email</u>	<u>Phone</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>Interview Complete</u>
Shopwindow	[Redacted]	[Redacted]	(734) 233-4810	Current	Unable to Connect
Throdle				Current	Complete
Clipboard Scanner				Current	Complete
Wired Off-Road				Current	Complete
Flymoney Games				Current	Complete
Lease Magnets				Current	Unable to Connect
AuraLabs				Graduated	Complete
KISS App				Current	Complete
Live Road Analytics				Current	Complete
CultureBie				Current	Unable to Connect
Celant				Current	Complete
e-Cell Secure				Current	Unable to Connect
LoanSense				Current	Unable to Connect
Blue Conduit				Current	Unable to Connect
DEO Care				Current	Complete
Zonder App				Current	Complete
MML Logistics				Current	Complete
Courtney	Company contact information redacted for anonymity				
Jennifer					
Heather					
Rachel					
Matheus					
Unable to Connect with Client					

Figure 8

Research survey findings

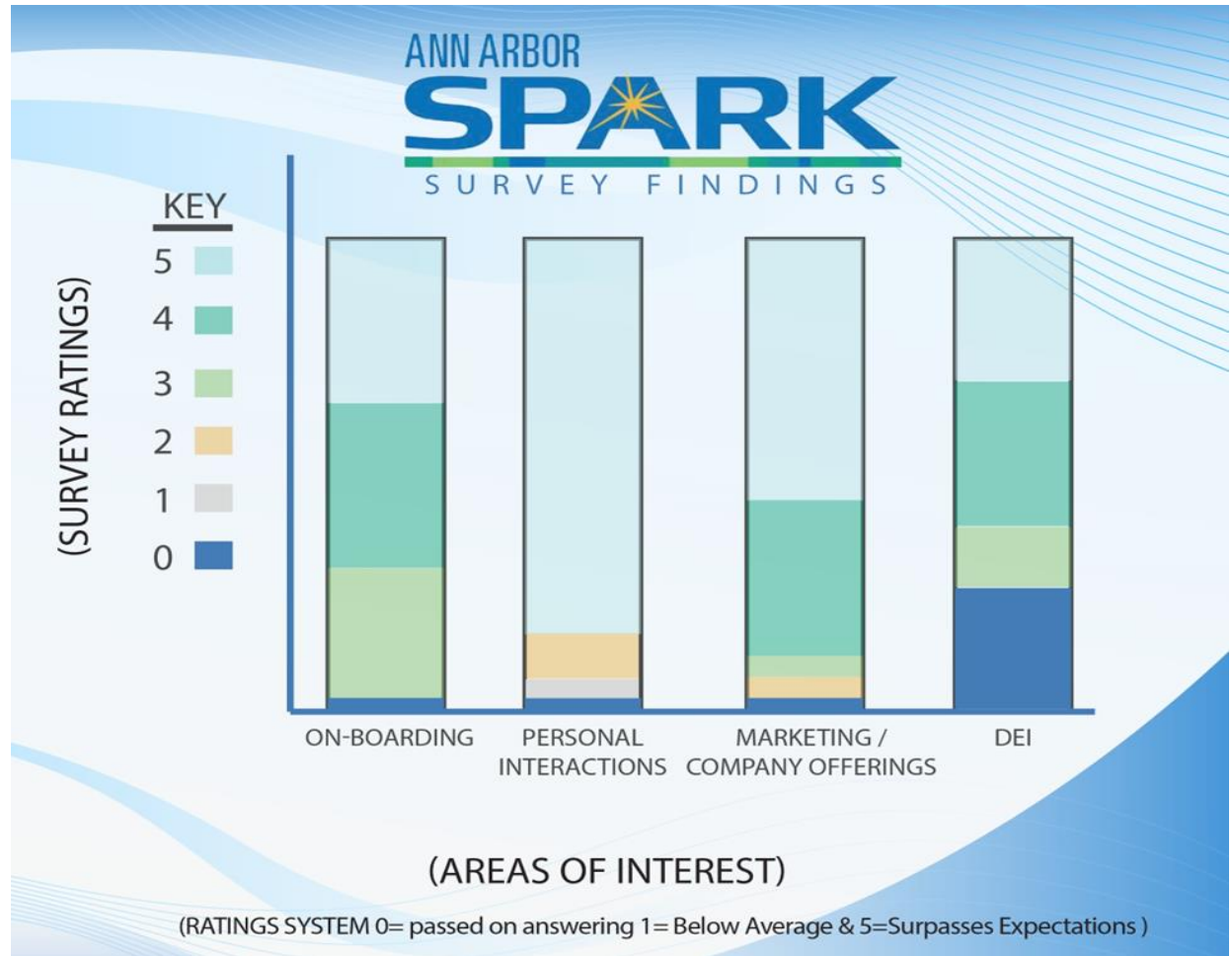


Figure 9

Overall client suggested improvement areas

