

Positioning

By Jerry W. Thomas

What a strange word, “positioning.” Its origins are shrouded in the fog of history. The popular marketing writers, Jack Trout and Al Ries, started talking about position or positioning in 1972 or thereabouts, and took credit later for having invented positioning.

However, I believe that positioning was an emerging concept and a term, in at least limited use, within the marketing and advertising community at the time that Trout and Ries first wrote about it. Certainly, the basic concepts of positioning were not new in 1972. The term “positioning” was described by Trout and Ries as the basic position in the consumer’s mind occupied by a brand. They saw positioning as an antidote to the “overcommunicated” society, in which consumers were drowning in a sea of advertising messages. The key, they argued, was to occupy a unique position in the consumer’s mind to cut through all of the confusion caused by brand proliferation and advertising clutter.

The term “positioning” is widely used within the marketing and advertising communities today, and its meaning has expanded beyond

the narrow definitions of Trout and Ries. Positioning is often used nowadays as a broad synonym for marketing strategy. However, the terms “positioning” and “marketing strategy” should not be used interchangeably. Rather, positioning should be thought of as an element of strategy, a component of strategy, not as the strategy itself.

The term “positioning” is, and should be, intimately connected to the concept of “target market.” That is, a brand’s positioning defines the target audience. For example, an airline could position itself against other airlines, which defines the target audience as airline travelers. Or, it could position itself against all modes of transportation between two destinations, which then defines the target audience as all travelers between those two markets.

The second positioning reaches out to a much larger target audience. Another example: a brand of peanut butter could position itself against all competing brands of peanut butter, which defines the audience as peanut butter users. Or, the brand could position itself against margarine and butter, which defines a very different target market. Positioning, then, is analogous to aiming an artillery field gun. How you position the cannon defines who and what the target is. So, the term “aiming” is not a bad definition of positioning, and the term “targeting” is not a bad definition of positioning.

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The positioning possibilities that exist for any given brand or service are almost infinite in number. Some commonly used positioning strategies are:

- Positioning against a broader market; for example, positioning a bicycle brand as a substitute for the automobile, rather than as a substitute for other brands of bicycles.
- Positioning against a price segment of the market; for example, positioning a car brand against luxury imported cars.
- Positioning against a usage segment of the market; for instance, positioning a brand of cooking oil as the very best brand of oil for frying chicken.
- Positioning against a geographic segment of a market; for example, positioning Ford trucks as made for driving conditions in Texas.
- Positioning against a psychographic segment of the market; as an example, positioning the Volvo as the car for drivers who are primarily concerned about safety.
- Positioning against a channel of distribution, a season of the year, a particular type of weather, a human fear, etc.

Again, positioning possibilities are almost limitless for any given brand and can be defined in many different ways. The correct positioning of a brand is basic and fundamental to its success; an incorrect or suboptimal positioning can doom a brand to underperformance or failure. So, how does one arrive at an optimal positioning for a given brand? The search for an optimal positioning begins in the mind of the consumer, and it is here that we must turn to marketing research for help.

Research Methods For Positioning

The first problem is “who do you talk to” to learn about positioning, or repositioning, a brand. At the beginning, it’s very important to talk to consumers representing a broad spectrum of the potential market. It is in these early stages that you must resist the temptation to focus in too quickly

on a narrow segment of consumers. Keep the market definitions very broad in the early stages of the research, so that you do not accidentally preordain the outcome before it even begins. For example, if you only interview people who are using rotary lawnmowers, you may find that they only want to buy rotary lawnmowers, but if you interviewed everyone who owned a lawn, you might identify many different needs, problems, and motives that could form the basis for a positioning strategy.

Qualitative methods (focus groups, depth interviews, and ethnography) are essential in the early stages. What do consumers know, and what do they not know? What language, associations, images, and metaphors do consumers use in talking about the category? What brands are they familiar with, and how much do they know about the different brands? What are their perceptions of each of these brands? What motivates them to consume the product or use the service? What are the key determinates of brand preference? How is the market segmented or subdivided? What products or services would be substituted if the subject brand were unavailable? What are the major channels of distribution, and how does the channel relate to perceptions and usage of the brands? Who are the heavy users of the category, the brand? Who are the brand decision makers, and what are the main elements of the decision process? The qualitative research should be designed to accomplish two broad objectives: to define an array of positioning possibilities and to help identify the likely target markets related to each positioning.

Quantitative methods come next. Some type of survey research (awareness, trial, and usage, or a segmentation study) is the next step. Again, as with the qualitative phase, the definition of the sampling universe must be kept very broad and inclusive—to avoid the preordination error. The purpose of the quantitative research is to confirm the hunches and hypotheses from the qualitative research, to more precisely define brand images and associations, to accurately measure awareness and knowledge levels, and to size the market segments identified during the qualitative phase. Now, by combining and analyzing the results of the qualita-

tive and the quantitative research, the number of basic positioning possibilities can be reduced to a small number of high potential positioning concepts. However at this stage, these ideas are not yet fully developed enough for final testing.

Innovation methods are often a next step. Small groups of target market consumers (often screened to be exceptionally creative) are used to generate a large number of positioning concepts, based on the results of the qualitative and quantitative research. That is, the previous marketing research is used to focus the creative efforts on basic positioning concepts of known value. A group of 8 to 10 creative individuals representative of the target market will spend a whole day in a fast-paced, high-energy ideation session to develop and “flesh out” a large number of positioning concepts that are “on strategy” and “on target.” The ideation facilitators then take this creative output and hammer out the final test-ready positioning concepts. The final concepts would go through a client review process (to judge feasibility) and a small-sample qualitative review to ensure that the concepts are communicating as intended.

Positioning concept tests are the final step in the process. Generally, matched samples of 200 to 300 target market consumers evaluate

the concepts. Each matched sample sees and evaluates only one concept (that is, the testing is monadic). The core questions revolve about planned purchase of the brand (given its implicit positioning), the image projected by the brand, the planned frequency of usage, pricing expectations, distribution expectations, potential problems, and so forth. Based on these tests, a winning positioning concept is identified. This winning positioning concept, then, becomes the blueprint for the development of advertising creative and supporting marketing plans and materials (packaging, promotion, pricing, brand name, distribution, product improvements, customer service, and so on).

Every brand has a positioning. Sometimes this positioning is obscure or unrecognized. Sometimes this positioning is a result of inertia, history, or competitive activities. However, a brand that wants to be strategically successful must not leave its positioning to chance or competitors. The company or brand that aspires to market dominance must take control of its positioning through the scientific methods of marketing research, and create the optimal positioning that will guide, focus, and energize its long-term advertising and marketing efforts. Happy positioning!

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About the Author

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Decision Analyst is a leading international marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new product ideation, new product research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.



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