



# 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 know from my own experience that positioning was a term in common use within the marketing and advertising community in the U.S. by the mid-1960s, long before Trout and Ries first wrote about it.



Positioning was described by Trout and Ries as “the basic position” in the consumer’s mind occupied by a brand. Trout and Ries 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 the confusion caused by brand proliferation and advertising clutter.

The term **positioning** is widely used within the marketing and advertising community today, and its meaning has expanded beyond the narrow definition from Trout and Ries. The term is now often used as a broad synonym for **marketing strategy**. However, the terms **positioning** and **marketing strategy** should not be used interchangeably. Positioning should be thought of as an element or component of strategy, not as the strategy itself.

Positioning tends to be intimately connected to the concept of a *target market*. That is, a brand’s positioning often 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, which then defines the target audience as all travelers—not just airline travelers. 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 all high-protein foods, which defines a very different and much larger 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 a first cousin to positioning, and the term **targeting** is also closely related to positioning.



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## Positioning Strategies

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

- Positioning against a **Broader Market**. For example, positioning a bicycle brand as a substitute for automobiles, 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 imported luxury cars.
- Positioning against a **Usage Segment** of the market. For instance, positioning a brand of cooking oil as best for sautéing vegetables.
- 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 Volvo for drivers who are primarily concerned about safety.
- Positioning against a **Channel of Distribution**, such as supermarkets, or convenience stores, or hardware stores, or vending machines, etc.
- Positioning against a **Media Channel**; for example, positioning a line of Western clothing as for listeners of Country Music on radio stations.
- Positioning against a **Season** of the year, or against a **Competitive Brand**, or against a **Consumer 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 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 question 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 who represent a broad spectrum of the potential market. In the early stages of research, you must resist the temptation to focus in too quickly on a narrow segment of consumers. Keep the market definitions very broad initially, so that you do not accidentally preordain the outcome before research 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 of research:

- 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 determinants of brand preference? What variables drive brand choice?
- What products or services would be substituted if the subject brand were unavailable?
- What are the major channels of distribution, and how do the channels relate to perceptions and usage of the brands?
- Who are the heavy users of the category and of 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: define an array of positioning possibilities, and to help identify the likely target markets related to each positioning.

**Quantitative methods** come next. Conducting some type of survey research (awareness, trial and usage, or a segmentation study) is key. 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 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 qualitative 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 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 would spend a 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 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

