

A FIXED POSITION IN A MOVING WORLD

Positioning As A Metaphor by Bruce W. Marcus

There is no great mystique to the marketing concept of positioning. While it's not as simple as some would make it seem, nor as complex as others would have you believe, it's still very real.

Like so many words used in marketing, positioning has come to be shorthand for some ideas that have come a long way in the pursuit of sound marketing practice. First popularized by Ries and Trout in their 1981 book, *Positioning*, the concept took a basic advertising practice and codified it in a way that made it possible for other marketers to think differently about approaches to the market.

The basic idea is simple. Or at least, simple to state.

If you think of marketing as a process to move goods and services to the consumer, there are two ways to view the process -- either you sell people what they want, or you try to persuade people to buy what you want to sell. The second is an almost inevitably fruitless exercise in egocentric behavior. I can make you buy anything because I'm a good salesman. It's an uphill trudge, and yet, it seems to be the way to which most people gravitate.

Selling people what they want is obviously the better way, although it's not without its rigors. How do you know what they want? How do they know what they want? When nylon was invented in the 1940s, could you have asked women who had never heard of the stuff if they wanted nylon hose?

We do know that people buy what they need. They are sold what they're persuaded they need. And if you have to persuade people that they need something, isn't that the same as selling what you want to sell?

Not quite -- if you can cast your product or service in a context that addresses the consumer's needs or concerns. DuPont solved the nylon problem by asking, "Would you be interested in hose that were as sheer or beautiful as silk hose, but wore like iron, and didn't cost any more than silk?"

And that was positioning before the word was ever used. DuPont, and other good marketers of their day, did three things....

- They defined consumer expectations
- They figured out how to meet those expectations with a product they had developed that nobody had ever heard of.

- They asked themselves, "What fact or value can we communicate to the market that would address those expectations and concerns?"

From those three points they developed the marketing campaign that sold nylons. That's positioning.

And these three points, articulated by Peter Horowitz of Price Waterhouse, define the clearest approach to how positioning might be used to develop a strategic plan.

But articulating a position is hardly a total marketing plan. A number of elements must be addressed to turn a position into a marketing plan.

A caveat. There is a distinct difference, too often ignored, between a position and a mission.

A mission is a projection of objectives. It defines what the firm thinks its purpose is -- where it would like to go in the business context ... how it would like to serve its clients ... how it would like to be perceived by the community it serves. It is, essentially, a wish list and a blueprint for the company. But a mission is the company's business, not the consumer's. I say to you, "I would like you to be my friend and for you to love me." That's my mission. And you say to me, "That may be what you want, but what's that got to do with what I want? Why should I be your friend, and what have you done for me that's lovable?"

No, a mission statement is not a position.

Nor is it a niche, in which you choose a specific capability, or a specific industry, and promote your capabilities or experience in that industry to a carefully defined audience. In fact, positioning enhances both niche and target marketing.

A position says, "I understand what you want and need, and what concerns you most, and I'm going to give it to you."

In practical terms, how does it work? More caveats.

- The position must stem from the best possible understanding of the needs, aspirations, and expectations of the prospective clientele. There should be a perception of what your market most wants of a firm like yours -- and that perception comes ideally from research. Many firms have spent several million dollars each on just this kind of research. If you don't have that kind of money -- or commitment -- do your own survey. Ask your existing customers, your friends, their friends -- anybody. But don't guess. Know.
- The position must be based on reality. You may take the position -- and advertise -- that you offer better service. But if you can't prove it, or it just isn't so, you're ultimately going to lose more than you gain. Don't promise

what you can't deliver. The acoustics of the marketplace are magnificent, and if your promise is not deliverable, you'll get caught and hung.

- The position you choose must spring from -- and be driven by -- your own business strategy. You've got to look at your firm ... see who you are and what you want to be ... consider partner aspirations ... weigh skills, strengths and weaknesses. If you ignore this step, you stand in danger of not only selling a mythical firm, but of being unable to deliver what you sell.
- There are at least two ways in which a position can be determined. The first is a perception of the market needs, however that perception is arrived at. The second is to choose market opportunity. The first is a careful analysis of what the market wants and needs, and that you can supply. The second sees an opportunity that may not have existed before. Either way, the position must be reinforced in a proper marketing campaign.
- Either work with available skills, or develop new skills before the positioning program begins. It's one thing to recognize the opportunities for your company for helping your community, and to choose a position based upon the needs of the community. It's another thing to have a real ability to serve those needs.
- Choose a single position point. Diverse positions are impossible to sell effectively, and each position, instead of reinforcing the others, dilutes them all. One point, one thrust. Examples cited by one expert, Paul Cole of Decision Research, are based on the observation that a customer's overall impression of a company is one-dimensional. "Pepsi, for example, is associated with youth. Volvo with safety, Burger King with flame-broiled food," he says. Most recently, TWA is stressing comfort and leg room in its planes. "Only when a market has fully accepted the unique position," says Cole, "should a company attempt to build positioning extensions. Now that BMW is fully associated with full performance, it can begin to extend its positioning to luxury as well."
- Reis and Trout point out that the only company with a predefined position is the market leader -- the number one company in the field. It tells the market that the market itself prefers that company. It also defines the market from which competitors must capture a share, if possible.
- Emphasis, in positioning, must always be on how the public will perceive the company, and not on how the company perceives itself, or would like to be perceived. The position must stem from the reality of the company and the market, and not from an arbitrary notion of what will sell, regardless of the reality of what the company is. Reality counts, not image. The danger in the concept of image is that it implies that symbols can be manipulated to control any image -- even one that's not rooted in reality. It simply isn't true.

If you don't like the perception that the public has of your reality, change your company, not the symbols. As the old man said, what you are speaks so loud I can't hear what you say you are

- When the position is determined, it must be communicated internally, even before it's communicated externally. Simply, if you're going to tell the world who you are, don't you think you should tell your own staff and colleagues first? After all, they're the ones who have to breath life into the position, aren't they?

Given the defined position, three things must be kept in mind ...

- Positions are dynamic. They should be rethought periodically, in every aspect, to be sure that they still apply. The market may change, or you may change.
- No position will work if it doesn't, in some way, differentiate your company from others.
- The position is ultimately nothing more than a platform to project your company's ability to meet the needs and expectations of a prospective clientele. The marketing program, in all its aspects, must be used to make that position live and viable as a marketing device.

The marketing program may be as elaborate or as simple as your budget and marketing objectives will allow, but if the position you select is to be effective, the program must spring from that platform.

In marketing, the tools of marketing are used to project that platform -- that singular reason for people to want to do business with you -- in an integrated and concerted effort. Advertising, even when millions are spent on it, and even if the ads perfectly reflect and project the position, won't produce a single client if there isn't a well-rounded support program that includes some projection of specific capability.

And no positioning program, nor any marketing program, will work if it doesn't lead directly to the opportunity to sell to the customer. Which brings it all down to effective sales training

A position, as with any aspect of marketing, or reputation in marketing, is only as good as the way in which it's used. If it isn't constantly reinforced, it's useless. It's like a hoop. As long as you keep beating it with a stick, it keeps rolling. When you stop, the hoop falls over, and the distance it's gone is lost

Can you market without a position? Of course. But it's like cutting thick steak with a dull fork. It may work eventually, but it isn't worth the effort.

Bruce W. Marcus is a Connecticut-based consultant in marketing and strategic planning for professional firms, the author of CLIENT AT THE CORE (with August Aquila, John Wiley & Sons, 2005) and the editor of THE MARCUS LETTER ON PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MARKETING, now on www.marcusletter.com. His Email address is marcus@marcusletter.com © Bruce W. Marcus. All rights reserved.