



Brand Positioning Explored (Parts I & II)

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So many of us in the Radio industry need a deeper understanding of the goals/objectives of national advertisers and their clients so that we'll have better opportunities for our "place at the table" when they design their media plans.

The act of brand positioning is the linchpin of an effective communications plan. It provides not only consumer salience in motivating specific brand choice, but also acts as a brand compass in determining the direction of all marketing disciplines, including creative, media, promotion, POS, merchandising, etc. Without solid positioning, a business or organization ends up speaking with many different voices, saying nothing and going nowhere. Unfortunately, the lack of meaningful positioning is oftentimes the norm and the instigator to the blind development of advertising that, in turn, results in campaigns that are entirely at the mercy of luck and chance in generating the desired results.

This paper presents Part I of a series on positioning. In this initial piece, we'll explore what real positioning is (and isn't) and why it is the critical component in making communications programs effective.

What It Is and Is Not

Many marketers often confuse the act of "branding" with "positioning," oftentimes using them interchangeably as if they were the same. They are not.

Branding is about coverage and ubiquity; it provides awareness and subsequent recognition so that consumers KNOW of you. Conversely, positioning is about creating a customer-driven identity and image definition that leads to consumers WANTING you. It is about arriving at what your brand stands for and the way in which you want it perceived, relative to your competition. What is most important to understand is that brand positioning is the core essence that other brand and marketing initiatives must follow and incorporate.

Positioning, although formalized with dedicated language only about 25 years ago, has been around for as long as branding and advertising have existed. A classic example is Marlboro Cigarettes and the Marlboro Cowboy from the 1950s. The positioning, of course, had nothing to do with product attributes such as flavor and everything to do with "masculinity." Smoke these and you take on the aura of the archetypal cowboy hero. Similarly, Wonder Bread in the 1960s wasn't selling bread for sandwiches and toast. They were selling the "promise of healthier kids" to mothers because it was better for them than other brands. More recently, Apple's iPod was less about music when introduced and more about "cool technology and individualism." This positioning permeated everything Apple has put

behind the brand, from PR, to ads, to in-store; kids (primarily) get the meaning and want the product.

Ad icon Bill Bernbach viewed the concept of positioning as the articulation of an emotional engagement through ads, while at the other end, Rosser Reeves and Ted Bates viewed it as the unique selling proposition (USP) of a product -- some attribute or brand characteristic that was distinctive to a particular product. Over time, and given the commoditization of virtually every product category, we have seen an evolution of positioning into one that is comprised of both the emotional (Bernbach) and the functional (Reeves/Bates).

Modern day brand positioning then can be summarized as follows:

Positioning describes both intellectually and emotionally who the company is, what it aspires to be, and why anyone should care. The positioning statement expresses how you wish to be perceived, not how consumers currently perceive you. At the simplest level, it informs, identifies, and lays the foundation for a more binding relationship with the consuming group a company serves.

In essence, positioning is about manipulating the core consumer thought takeaway you want to deliver in every communication channel of product promotion, both internally and externally. It is how the brand defines itself in portraying a careful and accurate reflection of the value your company/brand brings to the market. It is less mass marketed spoken words or phrases and more the enriched meaning of who you are as embodied in everything the brand crosses. As an example, here is what the positioning statement for Dove soap looks like:

*Beauty. It's not about glamour or fame. It's about
(Point of Differentiation)
Every woman and the beauty that is in each of us.
(Market Segment) (Frame of Reference)
That's what Dove is all about. And that's why
(Brand)
More women trust their skin to Dove.
(Competitive Edge) (Brand)*

So, while positioning is the intersection of emotion and intellect, what it is not is:

- A logo
- A tagline or slogan
- An empty promise
- Advertising copy
- Branding
- Pure product functionality

Although the above are not the foundation of a positioning, as marketing elements, they should be designed in a way that helps communicate your intended positioning.

Why Do You Need Positioning?

Consumers need guideposts in rummaging through the morass of like products in all segments. And they need much more than the traditional laundry list of attributes given the functional product benefit similarities that exist across products and categories. In short (and documented in the recent WirthlinWorldwide study from RAEL), they need emotional attachment as well as functional attributes. This is indeed what a well-crafted position can provide and why it is so critical in establishing through all communication channels. Without it, a brand is no more than a name and address.

Some might think that the luxury of a vast advertising spend and a self-proclaimed product uniqueness can neutralize any negative effect a positioning void might bring, but that is rarely the case. As evidence, you only have to go back to the late '90s and the dot-com rush to see the disaster that can result from not having a position. As most of us remember, dozens of companies ran numb with some clever ad and brand platform targeted to the masses, spending money faster than the media could accept it.

What resulted ultimately was a huge bust for most of these big spenders as what they critically failed at was articulating a position of meaning and personal value as to why you should participate or interact with their URL. So while you were aware of their name and location (branding), there was no other influence established as to what they stood for, did, and excelled at that would make your life a bit better. These highly funded brand identity efforts, that in many cases culminated in 30-second Super Bowl executions, failed miserably and in many cases, contributed to a speedy demise of the enterprise.

Arguably, the fundamental reason you need well-grounded positioning in more effectively marketing brands and products is that in many instances it is one of the last available platforms for competitive differentiation in forging an identity with your consuming product market. With the exception of hi-tech and a few other categories where brands can lead with functional innovation as a product attribute differentiator, most categories are pretty much at functional parity. Think about it, consumers have dozens of legitimate brand choices in cars, beer, fashion, cosmetics, consumer electronics, laundry detergents, wireless carriers, banks, mass retailers, etc. And since only one can be the low-cost leader in any one category, brand positioning is ultimately what differentiates and guides consumers in gravitating to one brand over another. It is the point at which product identity intersects with individual aspiration and need. For example, you aren't buying German engineering when you buy a BMW. You're buying an unparalleled driving experience (BMW's positioning).

Some Examples of Brands Who Do It Well

Many more brands speak to positioning than actually do it well. Most lose it in the land of marketing-speak, thinking that the ad they run can drill home their position through explicit articulation of a line or two. But your ability to effectively connect your position with the target is both explicit and implicit. The power is in having your target feel what it is you stand for. This emotion is extracted and conveyed in both what is said and what is not said.

As evidence, the following capture some fairly good examples of brands that have rock-solid positioning. To keep it simple, we summarized what in most instances was a paragraph or two detailing their position into one or two words; words that, while not necessarily a part of ad copy, reflect what they hope to capture in the minds of their key prospects in building brand affinity and preference:

- Mont Blanc - “Fashion”
- Microsoft - “Freedom”
- Volvo - “Safety”
- Nike - “Courage”
- Harley - “No Rules”
- Miller Lite - “Fun”
- L’Oreal - “Transformation”
- MasterCard - “Life & Family”
- GE - “Imagination”
- DeBeers - “Romance”
- Wal-Mart - “Value”
- Home Depot - “Service”
- Levi’s - “Independence”
- 3M - “Innovation”
- Virgin - “Anti-establishment”
- Honda - “Dependability”

Through it all, salient and motivating brand positioning is imperative in setting a brand up for increased sales and consumer acceptance potential. Your knowledge of what positioning is and the variables comprised within can only benefit you in better serving your clients, local or national. And, while they may not ask you to develop client positioning, the fact that you are in tune with this critical strategic decision will elevate you in their mind in terms of trust, confidence, and value. This represents a point of separation from your media colleagues who rush in to sell a page, billboard, or spot and then rush out.

So, now we have a sense of what positioning is, why it’s important, and why you should understand it.