



# Messages that Matter

## Positioning Experts in B2B Software Marketing

### **The 3Cs of Successful Positioning - Part III: Get your channel involved in positioning. It's good for both of you.**

**By Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter**

If there's a disconnect between your channel and your marketing team, neither will reach their full potential. In this column, you'll see how involving your channel in the positioning process is a key ingredient in successful marketing and sales. It also helps establish and maintain a relationship that pays off for both you and your channel. Whether you sell direct, your channel is the sales department down the hall, or your channel partners are value-added resellers (VARs), it works like a charm.

It also takes a lot of work. But it's worth the effort because the benefits are so compelling. Channel involvement equals improvement - in relations, and in the quality of research you receive to support the positioning process. Getting closer to your channel brings you closer to the battleground, so you can gain a better understanding of what your channel needs to win. An unexpected benefit might be the most important of all - your sales team learns how to communicate more effectively with prospects.

This is the third column in a series on the 3Cs of successful positioning - your Customer, your Competition and your Channel - to help you understand how each is vital to developing a unique and effective marketing position for your B2B software or service. In my last column, I explained how your Channel gives you fast access to the other 2Cs - your Customer and Competition, and can provide important information about them and from them. The next column will emphasize how critical it is to really know your customer; more to the point, why you need to know your customer as well as you know your product.

#### **Easy customer access means relations are good, or at least improving**

When was the last time you heard a sales person rave about your company's marketing? How often have sales people told you that the standard corporate sales presentation misses the mark (to put it politely,) so they make up their own? They know what gets prospects excited about the product. And it's almost a point of pride not to share that first hand intelligence.

In my experience, sales and marketing rarely feel like allies with shared goals and a trusting relationship. If you sell through a channel, the problems may be magnified and especially problematic, because many VARs aren't willing to help with customer contacts. And, jumping ahead to a subject we'll discuss in the next column, knowing your customer is perhaps the most important hurdle to successful positioning. If you don't have easy access to your customers - a common problem with companies who sell exclusively through a channel - your marketing efforts are likely to suffer.

There are many reasons - some valid - that VARs are protective of their customers. They may fear that letting a software partner talk to their customers sets the stage for bypassing the VAR. Some worry that it might result in other VARs stealing their customers. Others worry that contact will negatively impact either a good relation or reveal a marginal one.

These shortsighted attitudes hurt many companies' sales and marketing efforts, but like any other fact of life, you have to address it and turn the situation around.

#### **Making your channel your positioning partner**

You'll have to invest some time and effort to help your channel understand your positioning process, why it's important, and how the channel benefits by participating. Your task is to replace their distrust with willing, enthusiastic, participation. Let your channel know how they can help. Here are some examples:

1. Provide input about successes, customer problems, competitive challenges and outright failures...literally anything that relates to strengths or weaknesses of your

- product and how customers perceive it.
2. Help make customer introductions
3. Provide feedback on your draft message strategy, marketing materials, presentations, etc.
4. Provide "battlefield intelligence" on current trends and issues, and ones they see developing.

Create a presentation to channel members that summarizes your positioning process, depicting their pivotal role. Then, use it as often as you can to drum up interest, enthusiasm and support.

### **Brainstorming - insight by invitation**

The first step in the positioning process is to put together a team that's responsible for research, brainstorming and the iterative process of converging on the right positioning statement and message strategy. Invite the channel or your sales department to be part of the team that should also include product marketing, marketing and management.

Most good sales people would rather be selling. Don't fight it; just make them aware of the process, and set up a way to get their input and feedback. It could be an occasional meeting with follow-ups. Be sure to include the channel on the team's distribution list to keep them in the loop. If you want the channel to share, you have to be willing to share as well.

Before you start a brainstorming session (where you come up with ideas for your message strategy), create a document that summarizes information you've gathered about the 3Cs - your customer, competition and channel. That way, anyone involved in either brainstorming or reviewing drafts of the message strategy can quickly refer to the research and possibly offer amendments.

Then schedule your first brainstorming session. A productive session has a definite structure and focus, as well as basic rules for participants to keep the exercise from degenerating into chaos with egos on stage. Some basic ground rules:

- Make "what do you like about it?" the theme of the session.
- No negatives allowed; they destroy the momentum of idea generation.
- Build on each others' ideas.
- Have fun - there is no such thing as a bad idea.
- But no war stories, especially ones that start "We tried that..."

Eventually you will develop a draft positioning statement with three supporting benefit statements and as much detail as you feel is necessary to support them. As you refine the drafts, continue to seek feedback from those in the channel who have contributed input, and acknowledge their contributions.

Once you have a final draft message strategy, test it with a variety of audiences, especially your channel. Even if they have been a participant, like everyone, they'll relish being a critic.

### **Channel buy-in means they'll actually use what you've created**

With a little luck and a lot of diplomacy, you'll get valuable feedback from your channel on the viability of your positioning and marketing message.

By involving your channel, you've opened lines of communication and shared a sense of mission. You will better understand the purchase process, and what your sales force or VAR channel feels they need to close more business. If they won't tell you, ask.

As a result, the materials you create - based on your message strategy, of course - are likely to be received with a much more open mind. Your channel will understand the thinking behind your product message strategies, especially if they recognize some of their own contribution. They'll not only use the materials you provide, but be in a better position to articulate your positioning to the buyer. The result is a more consistent message delivered over and over throughout the marketing and sales effort. Consistency and **repetition** are two of the most important factors in helping you establish a position for your product in your prospects' minds and in the market.

### **How to talk so prospects will listen**

I met with a VP of marketing recently, who confirmed the importance of a unified message strategy for marketing and sales. I shared a story about a client who suddenly

found himself face-to-face with Bill Gates, who asked for a demo. My client - a channel manager and former sales person - went blank for a moment, then remembered the high-level product message strategy, and was able to both talk and show his product's benefits under a fair amount of pressure. The marketing VP said that he felt that sales people - even when schooled in product benefits - typically default to a feature/function discussion. I had to agree in general, but my client is proof that when a company takes positioning seriously, it can permeate your entire organization.

That's because you also need to explain to anyone involved in the positioning process why a target audience either accepts or rejects your message. Today, buyers are inundated with commercial messages. They are very good at screening out unimportant ones. A list of product features that doesn't clearly express the benefits to the audience just isn't important enough to stick. But if your sales channel is the one that comes to a prospect demonstrating an intimate understanding of the prospect's key problems, and can talk in benefit terms, your message will get through the filter.

When you make your internal presentations about the positioning process, the importance of talking about benefits that address target market problems needs to be highlighted, and repeated. It's the reason you position in the first place. Make it your goal to get this point across to anyone involved in the positioning process and you'll increase the chances that they'll use your message strategies.

As I said in past columns, we're not just trying to be creative; we're also talking the truth about our products. Discover it with the help of your channel, and then communicate the unique truth about your product in benefit terms. Whether you use it for marketing or sales, positioning works.

### **Conclusion**

Think of the positioning process as a consensus building exercise to bring the whole organization - including the channel - behind the position you have decided to claim.

A positioning process that puts the channel in the middle of the effort demonstrates your recognition of the channel's importance, and is bound to improve channel relations, while contributing to greater success in marketing and sales. It will invigorate your channel by making them feel that their input counts and that the outcome results in more effective selling. They'll open up, allowing you to tap into their real-world knowledge and experience. You get better, more insightful information, and they get better ammunition to win the sales battle.

Now everyone's got to love that!

*About the author: Lawson Abinanti is co-founder of Messages that Matter, a consulting firm that helps B2B software companies create compelling message strategies that build awareness and demand. Messages that Matter gives clients the knowledge and tools to develop powerful message strategies that differentiate products and services from those of the competition. Lawson has held strategic marketing positions with several B2B software companies including Navision, Applix, TM1 Software and Timeline. He can be reached at [lawson@messagethatmatter.com](mailto:lawson@messagethatmatter.com).*