



Messages that Matter

Positioning Experts in B2B Software Marketing

Getting Management to buy-in on positioning By Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter

When members of your executive management team communicate with key market influencers, are they delivering the right message? Or winging it? Are your product people muttering that management doesn't listen to them - or worse? Ouch!

Did I hit a sensitive nerve? If the message that key influencers hear from top management is different from the one going out in the rest of your marketing communications, you've got a problem and a half. Not only is confusion inevitable, but your brass is not going to enjoy being put in an awkward spot.

The best way to solve this problem is to make sure it doesn't happen. Adopt a positioning process that includes executive management approval of your message strategies.

Building consensus from the top down

Lack of consensus about the marketing message is one of the most common problems I've experienced in my B2B software career. A president will tell you his or her sales and marketing teams just don't get it. If only they'd listen to the president. Ask the VP of Sales and the VP of Marketing why someone should care about the company's products, and you'll get two different stories. The top sales person has another great pitch, and so it goes. Sales and marketing efforts are diluted, and far less effective than they could be. That's why management approval of your message strategies is such a critical step in successful positioning.

The ideal positioning process involves some members of the executive management team throughout the process, not just the VP of marketing. But inviting them to get involved in the positioning process is often an exercise in futility. They are either too busy, or don't understand the importance of effective positioning, and simply won't make the time to participate. Make them understand that getting your positioning and message strategy right is about as important as getting the product right. Then make sure everyone in the organization understands the importance of positioning and agrees on what it should be. It's a Law of Nature (well, human nature anyway): approval by top management is a great consensus builder, however it's not a guarantee that everyone will fall in line. In another column I'll explain how to get buy-in from everyone else in the organization who uses the message strategy, particularly sales, or your channel partners.

Get your story straight

Several years ago when I became director of product marketing for an international ERP software company, it became immediately apparent that I had stepped into a hornet's nest. Several members of the executive management had their own "great" stories about the company, and its products. Corporate marketing had another story. The market had its own version.

None of the stories were terribly compelling. My mission was to significantly improve the marketing effort from the ground up, starting with product marketing. The first step I took was to hire a consultant who taught our product managers how to position their products using a proven methodology. The methodology was easy to learn, and the product teams were quickly in the midst of positioning their products, a process that took several months because they had many other pressing items on their agenda.

As an aside, a typical positioning exercise can vary in length from several days to several months depending on factors such as time available, focus, and how well you understand your competition and your customers. The latter will determine the amount of time spent on market research. In our case, we sold through a channel, so customer access was a challenge. This slowed the process because we couldn't contact customers

directly; we had to go through the country manager and the VAR before we could talk to the customer.

PowerPoint for the Powerful

The final step in our positioning process was a presentation to members of the executive management team. They could approve the message strategy, suggest modifications, request that we do more field-testing, or send us back to the drawing board.

Each product manager's presentation consisted of 12 to 15 PowerPoint slides that summarized the research that led to the proposed message strategy - a concise positioning statement (12 words or less) and three supporting benefit statements that unfolded the story in more detail. In addition, members of the management team were provided with a three- to five-page document that summarized the research that supported the proposed positioning.

Presenting...the Three C's

In presenting the research, the product managers' demonstrated their in-depth understanding of the three C's:

- Customer - what are the target market's most pressing problems? What keeps decision makers awake at night?
- Competition - how do our competitors position themselves? Is there any unclaimed space we can claim? Or a fulcrum where we can apply our unique leverage?
- Channel - Are there any problems, unique challenges or special needs of our channel? The channel also provided valuable information for our message development including details of the purchase process and cycles, demographics, sales strategies and customer concerns.

The presentations gave senior management reason to believe the product managers when they explained the positioning process. First, it provided answers to three fundamental questions we had asked in the beginning:

- 1) What problem does this product solve?
- 2) How are people solving the problem today?
- 3) Why is our product a better solution?

An assessment of the competition followed with an analysis of their advertisements, web sites and other marketing materials. This analysis resulted in a positioning statement for each competitor. They were placed on a quadrant, or perception map. Management could then see positioning opportunities not claimed by others - the territories still open for us to claim.

Finally, the product managers explained the last step they took in the positioning process by answering the following questions about their products:

- 1) What is it? (Feature and product category)
- 2) What does it do? (Advantage and product description)
- 3) What does it deliver? (Product benefit)

Often, this seems so basic that nobody bothers to do the spadework needed to dig down below the obvious to the true foundation that builds a solid, unassailable positioning. What the product delivers - the key benefit attuned to the needs of the customer - is typically very close to the right position. At this point, the product managers introduced their proposed positioning statements and support points. An evaluation followed assessing each positioning statement. Was it unique, believable and usable? Was it concise enough to be remembered? Did it have meaning to the target market, and could it be used in a variety of marketing situations.

Make them earn your advocacy

During the positioning process, I worked closely with each product team, which was led by the product manager. In addition to being a coach, my challenge to the product managers was that I had to support and approve the management presentation. They had to convince me before they got to go to the brass. We both understood that this was intended to be more than dress rehearsal. I needed to be a strong advocate to stand with the product manager when the inevitable criticisms would come from the management team.

Conviction is an important result of a successful positioning exercise. It comes from following a process, knowing you have gathered the critical facts, getting extensive input and feedback, and being willing to discover an even better position at any time in the process. Even at the end. It is belief...with an open mind.

Without conviction, your proposed positioning is dead on arrival, or not long after executive management tears into it. That's why having a process or methodology is so important. It gives you confidence that you've explored and converged on the right position, because you can easily explain its rationale. And you already know the answer to that awkward question, "What is this better than?" Rather than just picking an idea - perhaps the latest fad position, like "insight," - you've finished a discovery process, weighed the evidence and come to a logical conclusion.

The management presentations were challenging and fun. Almost every question, comment or objection was answered by referring back to the facts gathered and summarized in the presentation. The product team also had the opportunity to tap into the knowledge and experience of the management team. The process had also psychologically prepared the product managers. Just as they were never afraid to defend their positions, they were also prepared to discover a better position, if one appeared. Preparation had typically been so thorough, and the product managers so sure of their work that almost all the work was approved in a single meeting.

Of course, some went more smoothly than others. One in particular stood out. We could always count on the Vice President of Sales to challenge our work. In this case, he was particularly vociferous, tossing one challenge after the other for more than 45 minutes. Each challenge was handled adeptly by the product manager, and finally, the VP of Sales gave in. The product manager got her approval. As she left, she walked by the VP, patted him on the shoulder, as if to say, "good try. It's been fun."

All together now...

There's no doubt that following this process, the VP of Sales and the entire management team were highly aware of the positioning of her product and the others presented that day. And I think it is safe to say that if they needed to talk about a product, do a presentation, or discuss new product features with analysts or the media, they knew where to start - with the product managers, their positioning statements and their message strategies.

Members of the management team communicate regularly with important market influencers, including financial analysts, industry analysts and media, all of whom need to hear the same coherent message - a concise, compelling reason for why they should invest, recommend or write about your company, its products and services.

By gaining management's participation in the process and ultimately their buy-in, you solve one of the biggest problems in successfully positioning your products, services and the company. Management is primed to deliver the approved message strategies instead of inventing their own. Everyone stays on message for maximum marketing and sales effectiveness - as well as for consensus, direction and peace within the company.

The process can be daunting at times, but the outcome - delivering a consistent, focused message - is the easiest way to improve your overall marketing effectiveness. Try it.

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@messagesthatmatter.com.