



# Messages that Matter

## Positioning Experts in B2B Software Marketing

**Positioning makes your marketing budget go further - and hit the target**

**By Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter**

If you can you relate to any of these problems, it's time to establish a company-wide positioning process. Because these are telltale signs that your marketing budget is being dissipated and not realizing a meaningful return:

- It takes too long - forever - to create brochures, direct mail pieces, Web content, etc.
- Everyone has their own favorite product benefit, usually based on nothing more than gut feeling
- There's no internal belief in the current message to your market
- Your target audience response to your marketing message is lukewarm, at best

You might wonder why I refer to positioning as a company-wide process. After all, isn't marketing - specifically product marketing - responsible for creating the product message? Sure, but...how often have you heard sales grumble that marketing just doesn't get it? Or executives complain that marketing isn't delivering well-qualified leads? Or there's no excitement about the latest advertising campaign. And the complaints about marketing roll on...

A positioning process can overcome these problems and more. It should involve a mix of people/departments in your company. The more participants with a stake in success, the more likely you'll achieve consensus and conviction about the marketing message.

But doesn't that mean that your positioning process could go on forever?

### **Start with the process**

Sure, it takes time to create focus, consensus and conviction, but when would you rather spend the time? Most B2B software companies already spend a ton of time reviewing, editing and debating copy every time they create a new marketing piece. I call that positioning on the fly - attempting to learn to fly while the plane is in a nosedive. With so many opinions, beliefs and favorite benefits inserted into the ad copy, brochure copy, etc., the message invariably gets watered down, and becomes inconsistent. There's no central theme or idea, nothing that locks in on the prospect's problem. Instead, the ad or brochure makes some tired and totally predictable claims, like implement fast, easy-to-use, improve efficiency, leading to the same predictable benefits - "gives you a competitive advantage," or "do more with less."

The time spent on a disciplined positioning process concentrates the input and feedback where it can do the most good - in building a solid foundation for the position you want to claim in the market. It's also when you have the most time to listen to valid input and respond to criticism without the pressure of publication or production deadlines.

I know "business process" is an overused phrase in the B2B software world, but positioning is a business process, as much as budgeting or even product development. And the better you become at it, the more successful your company will be, because it helps you make sales.

Your business process for positioning can have a number of steps depending on your situation. For now, let's zero in on the problems identified at the start of this piece. You can solve these problems with a business process for positioning that includes these steps:

1. Select a new team each time you need to position a product, a suite, a service, etc.
2. Establish several feedback loops - formal and informal - throughout the process.
3. Establish evaluation criteria to test your positioning strategy for importance, believability and uniqueness.
4. Require management approval of all positioning strategies.

Start your process by selecting a good team with key members from product marketing, corporate marketing and sales, plus the director or vice president responsible for all positioning strategies. Add at least one "wild card," a strategic, creative thinker who understands your product, target customer and competition.

Select other participants, including your harshest critics, with the goal of achieving consensus as quickly as possible. This might be a marketing or sales person or a member of the executive team depending on where the source of discontent with marketing lies within your company.

It may sound like I'm inviting you to try herding cats, but there's a rationale behind enlisting what might be difficult people for the positioning team. Strive to discover reality - what's really going on in your market. "Difficult" people with all their opinions may know something that's invaluable, and they may better reflect what's going on outside the gates. The process is intended to provide a measuring stick; i.e., a way to internally test and judge your positioning strategy. The process also provides a framework to explain why one benefit statement is more important than another. You need multiple perspectives to discern why some perceived benefits are compelling, and others are not really benefits but instead advantages, and usually just a slight advantage over the competition.

The work that results from the team effort is likely to reflect a thorough consideration of all positioning opportunities, and helps to exhaust much of the internal resistance some people have to any work other than their own.

### **The feedback loop.**

Feedback loops - both formal and informal - make it clear throughout the company that the team is seeking an even better positioning strategy, and at the same time helps build consensus. Initial feedback should be informal. As your team brainstorms positioning statement options, some team members can test ideas with colleagues, customers or a person in sales, product development, consulting, etc. with a sharp eye for customer benefits. New ideas may emerge.

Formal feedback loops are more productive when the positioning team has conviction about its work. This is easier to achieve than you might think by using the following criteria to test your message strategy:

- Is it Important? (Does it address your target's MOST pressing problem?)
- Is it Believable? (Does it "ring true" by referencing existing market conditions?)
- Is it Usable? (Does it work well in any marketing medium?)
- And finally.... Is it Unique? (Are you the only one making this claim that meets all the other criteria?)

When you can answer "yes," with confidence to all these questions, and defend the strategy with valid evidence, it's time to begin formal feedback loops. Provide feedback respondents with the draft message strategy, a background document that includes an analysis of the message strategy against its criteria, and sample applications of the message strategy.

Who should be in the feedback loop? Start with people who normally review marketing materials, and expand the loop out to sales, customers and others who can give you a realistic sanity check about your work.

Once you receive enough feedback to provide meaningful guidance, circulate one last "draft," get input and create a final proposed positioning strategy for management approval. A positioning strategy includes your message strategy (a positioning statement and support points), important research findings, a rationale explanation and sample applications of the message strategy.

By now, your positioning strategy expresses the knowledge and wisdom of key people in your company and customers. Team members have developed consensus and conviction that the proposed strategy is the best one. That's because they have already defended or modified their strategy during the feedback loops, so they can stand up to any pushback from management. But the defense isn't based on opinion or the latest burst of creative thinking, it's based on hard evidence of its business value, - and vetted by company-wide input and feedback.

Assuming management approves your positioning strategy - and it will if your team has uncovered the "truth" about your product or service - here's the payoff:

1. You save time and money creating materials.
2. Your marketing and sales efforts are backed by conviction, enthusiasm and

- excitement leading to improved performance.
3. Your marketing message stands out in the crowd, creating more awareness and demand for your product, and increasing the return on your marketing and sales budgets.

How do you save money? First, you greatly reduce the time and manpower needed to create and review marketing materials. Since all your marketing communications use the message strategy, every project begins with a head start and wraps up without a lot of micro-editing, because everyone has already had their say during the feedback and approval processes. The debate focuses on the creative execution of the strategy. It sure beats doing an ad or mail piece by committee.

If you use an advertising agency, your ad agency team doesn't have to figure out what to say - at a cost of several weeks and thousands of dollars. The agency team focuses on what it does best - creative execution of your unique marketing message.

Your positioning strategy makes it easier to deliver the same message across all marketing activities, including advertising, Web sites, brochures, presentations to investors, industry analysts and, of course, prospects and customers. It's also easier to repeat the message. Remember repetition is one of the most important factors in claiming a position and giving it staying power. Believe me, you'll get tired of your message strategy long before your target audience does. So stick with it. It's amazing how much money you can save by continuing to use tools that still do the job, and haven't even begun to wear out.

*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).*

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