



*Positioning experts in B2B software marketing*

## **Audit your message strategy by answering three questions**

**by Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter**

A message strategy audit determines the effectiveness of your positioning strategy and whether you need to change or tweak it. The audit assesses your situation by answering these three basic questions:

1. Is your marketing claim important to the target market?
2. Is it unique?
3. Is it consistently executed?

It's a good idea to audit your message strategy every 12 months. By doing so, you'll stay on top of your competitors' marketing, and have confidence that you are delivering the right message to the market. There's a lot of information you'll need to gather to do a good job of answering each question, and I'll explain in this column what you need and why. Before I get into the detail, here's a quick summary of the audit process.

### **The quick answers to the questions**

Answer the first question by developing a list of key customer problems, and ranking them one through five. Then determine if your positioning statement addresses one of the top problems in a benefit way. If it does, you are making a claim that is important to your target market. If it doesn't address one of the top problems, you need to change your positioning statement.

A unique claim is one that only you are making. Test for uniqueness by analyzing competitors' advertising and Web site to determine how they are positioned. Then create a perceptual map that will show you whether your claim is unique or not. If you are making an important claim, but it's not unique, you may want to consider changing your message strategy.

The key to successful positioning is to consistently execute your message strategy in all your marketing communications, and then repeat it over and over. Check for consistency by first evaluating advertisements, then your Web site and finally press releases. The primary benefit should stand out in each medium. There are many reasons for inconsistent message strategy delivery. The audit identifies the causes, and recommends ways to deliver your message more consistently.

One outcome of the audit is that you decide there's a need to implement a standard process for positioning. Some of the steps in the process become obvious when you audit your message strategy. Let's take a closer look at how to do the audit.

### **Your product is only as important as the problem it solves**

Your prospects are overwhelmed by communication in today's fast-paced, high-tech world. They get so many marketing messages - somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 per day - that they have become experts at filtering them out. You need to become an expert at cutting through the filter with a message that is relevant, important and unmistakably yours.

A list of product features just won't cut it. Your passport through the filter is a benefit statement that addresses the primary concern that keeps your prospect awake at 2 am. Your target audience will listen when you demonstrate that you understand their problem, and clearly communicate the benefit your product offers to solve it. Give them a break and show them you really understand what's keeping them awake at night. Your single-mindedness will be rewarded. Once you've developed a list of key problems, you need to rank them. If you asked customers to rank problems when you surveyed them, this can go pretty quickly, but be alert for repetition (the same problem described in different words) and broad generalizations. The act of ranking the list of customers' problems gives you a gauge to measure your positioning statement. The test is simple: does the statement address the target audience's most pressing problem. If it doesn't, you may need to go back to the drawing board.

### **Give the prospect a break - differentiate!**

It's been more than 20 years since Al Reis and Jack Trout, said, in their marketing classic, *Positioning*. The battle for your mind: "too many companies embark on marketing and advertising as if the competitor's position did not exist. They advertise their products in a vacuum and are disappointed when their messages fail to get through."

The goal in positioning is to help the target market associate a significant benefit with your product or company. Failure to differentiate creates market confusion and that inevitably leads to longer sales cycles. Yet few companies successfully differentiate, generally because they either don't know how to evaluate and determine competitors' product positioning, or simply don't think it's important.

**Are you making a unique claim?**

It's pretty easy to learn how competitors are positioning themselves, because they do it in public. So start reading and analyzing your competitors' print advertisements, marketing collateral and Web sites with an eye to deducing the positioning behind them. You'll probably find that a lot of the marketing communications put out by your competitors aren't backed by a real position. Often, they're just a brain dump of product features. They lack the heart and soul of good positioning: a meaningful benefit statement; i.e., a reason the audience should care about their product.

A positioning statement frequently appears in the first or last paragraph (or both) of an advertisement, or in a prominent place on the home page of the Web site. A good one should be a focused benefit idea or concept underpinning the executional theme of the advertisement, home page, brochure, etc. For each competitor, analyze as much of their marketing material as possible, including direct and e-mail marketing pieces, brochures, and press announcements.

Once you have determined the competitors' positioning, organize the ideas or themes in a table according to the conveyed benefit statement. Some competitors are likely to have similar or identical positioning statements. Other competitors may publish many claims, making it harder to determine how they are positioned, if at all. It is common - and a mistake - for companies to make two or more benefit claims of equal importance. Check those too. Figure 1 is a real world example of how the following mid-market and enterprise accounting and ERP software companies were positioned in late 2005:

<b>Benefit</b>	<b><u>Lawson</u></b>	<b><u>MBS</u></b>	<b><u>Best</u></b>	<b><u>SAP</u></b>	<b><u>Oracle</u></b>	<b><u>SSA</u></b>
Understand needs of small & medium businesses			X			
Understand business fundamentals				X		
Flexible, adaptable		X	X	X		
Affordable		X			X	
Value	X				X	
Rapid Implementation & ROI						X

**Figure 1**

**Perception maps let you see where they ain't:**

OK. You've analyzed your competitors, and created an informative table. Now, how do you decide if there is an unclaimed gap you can claim for your own? Follow the baseball adage, and "hit 'em where they ain't."

A table won't show where, but a map will — a perceptual map of the competitive landscape. See Figure 2 below, which maps the positioning landscape for the software companies listed in the table.



**Figure 2 - ERP accounting vendor perceptual map**

By creating a perceptual map, you can easily determine whether your proposed product positioning is unique, and avoid creating me-too marketing materials that fail to set you apart from the competition. Testing your positioning statement for uniqueness is a critical step in the positioning process, but one that many B2B software marketers overlook. Don't let it happen to you.

**Consistency gives your positioning time to work.**

Change is not your friend when it comes to positioning. Your friend is consistent delivery and repetition. No matter how clever an idea, phrase, or tagline, if you fail to deliver a consistent message, over a long period of time, it will fail to reap the benefits of product positioning

The goal in positioning is to help the target market associate a benefit with your product or company. With some effort, time and money, you can claim a position by consistently communicating an idea that has meaning (it's important!) to the target audience, and then repeating it, and repeating it, and repeating it...

Even a weak positioning strategy, consistently executed over a period of at least 18 months, is far more effective than a strong position that is inconsistently executed, and changes once a year.

**What do I mean by consistent?**

I mean using the same, carefully crafted message strategy in all of your marketing communication. You say you don't have a message strategy. Then you need one! By creating a message strategy, it's easier for you to stay on-message across all marketing activities, including advertising, Web sites, brochures, public relations and presentations to prospects, customers, industry analysts, investors and, of course, key influencers.

And while you're doing that, keep an eye on your competitors. Those with a consistent message are likely to be tough competitors. When evaluating for consistency, first check print advertisements, then direct mail or e-mail campaigns, then your Web site, and finally press releases.

**Which is more important - repetition or consistency?**

Although repetition and consistent execution go hand in hand, repetition is the stronger partner. Repetition - that is, repeatedly exposing the target audience to executions of the same message over an extended time - is perhaps the most important factor in claiming a position and giving it staying power. Judging from the antsy-ness, most B2B marketers don't realize that their target audience may not even notice their message before the marketers get tired of it.

According to colleague and writer Orrie Frutkin, former ad agency creative supervisor, a common danger facing marketing campaigns is that people in the company and ad agency who have been living with the concepts and executions for so long may start to think of them as worn out. In fact, he knows of a couple of campaigns that were deemed to be worn out even before they had run!

A rule of thumb is that it takes at least 10 impressions before a target buyer even notices an advertisement. Imagine how many impressions you'll need before your audience associates a benefit with your product. When you develop a message strategy, expect to live with it for a long time; ideally two to three years. Stick with it! Keep repeating and repeating and repeating. And be patient. Believe me, you'll get tired of it long before your target market even notices it.

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**About the author:**

Lawson Abinanti is co-founder of [Messages that Matter](#), a consulting firm that helps B2B software and services 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. Clients include ADP Canada, ES Research, FRx Software, Kit Software, MapInfo, RightNow Technologies, VCG Software and VoxVue.

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