



Conviction is the intangible in successful positioning

by Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter

Conviction is an important intangible that can make or break your positioning strategy. You begin to develop conviction through research about your customer, competition and channel. But that's not enough to give you the conviction you need to stand up to powerful political forces in your company that may shoot holes in even the most compelling positioning statement.

Complete conviction in your work comes from a positioning process that includes evaluation criteria. It gives you a simple mechanism to determine that one statement is good and another not so good. All you have to do is answer the following questions about your positioning statement:

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? Does it differentiate you from your competitors?)

The importance of an evaluation criterion

This criterion improves your work throughout the positioning process. For example, during your first brainstorming session, you need the right starting point or it will take forever to cross the finish line. Those involved are free to suggest any positioning statement. You'll hit the bull's eye sooner if brainstorming ideas are important; they address your target buyers' most pressing problem. Reject those that do not.

But we're jumping ahead in the process. Before you put together a team to develop a message strategy, there's a lot of research that needs to be completed and documented. Successful positioning requires a thorough understanding of your customers, your competition and your channel. You need to be able to answer these questions before you start to develop a positioning statement and message strategy for your product or service:

1. What pressing problem does your product solve for your prospective customer?
2. How is your prospect solving that problem today?
3. What specific benefit does your product deliver?
4. Why is your product better than the current solution and competitive alternatives?
5. What makes your product unique in a way that is relevant to your prospect?
6. Can you communicate this difference in a way that sets your product apart from the competition?

Conviction comes from knowledge

Besides customer concerns, other psychographics such as industry and technology trends can affect your message strategy. So can demographics such as titles, SIC codes and company. The more you know about your target buyer, the more confidence and conviction you'll have in the effectiveness of your proposed positioning strategy.

Differentiation is critical to successful positioning of your product. You can often discover how a competitor is positioned by analyzing its print advertisements and Web site. A positioning statement - the idea or theme behind all of your competitors' marketing communications - usually appears in the first paragraph of an advertisement or in a prominent position on the home page of the Web site. It's a good idea to become familiar with competitors' messages in other marketing communications, such as direct marketing pieces, brochures, press announcements and trade show materials. See if there's consistency and continuity. You'll be more confident about your work by recognizing the realities of your competitors.

A rationale for your conviction

Now that you've done your research, create a rationale document that captures all the knowledge about your product's strengths and weaknesses, target market, market pressures, channel challenges, competition, etc. Eventually the rationale document will include an assessment of your message strategy that consists of a positioning statement and three to four supporting benefit statements.

Let's assume your team has converged on a good draft message strategy. The positioning statement is unique, important, believable and usable; it's 12 words or less (not including product title) and through creating samples, you know it adapts to marketing medium such as print ads, brochures, public relations, direct mail pieces, e-mail

blasts, the Web site, your trade show booth, etc. You've got conviction about your work, and are ready to see what the rest of the company thinks.

Your positioning process should include informal and formal feedback loops with stakeholders such as sales, channel members, marketing, public relations, product marketing and management. Provide them with the draft message strategy, a rationale document that includes an analysis of the message strategy using the criteria, and sample applications of the message strategy.

The way to know who's right

Then get ready for inevitable challenges to your work. Because when it comes to positioning your product or service, everyone has an opinion. So who's right? With no criterion to judge alternative ideas, a cynical answer might be the person with the most political capital. Instead, even management's ideas can be rejected or given further consideration with the simple test and explanation: A good positioning statement needs to be important, believable and unique or your target audience will ignore your marketing efforts.

Just remember there's always potential to improve your work by considering different, compelling alternatives. Be willing to discover an even better position at any time in the process. Even at the end. It is belief...with an open mind.

Dead on arrival without conviction

The best positioning strategy may not win without conviction. It comes from following a process, knowing you have gathered the critical facts, getting extensive input and feedback, and using criteria to evaluate your options.

Without a formal positioning process that includes evaluation criterion, it's hard to have conviction and your proposed positioning strategy could be dead on arrival. You're likely to give in and try something different every time someone challenges your strategy. That's why many companies end up with a muddled positioning strategy for their products or services. They jump from one concept to the next with no way of judging or defending the latest one. Don't let it happen to you. Adopt a positioning process that includes an evaluation criterion.

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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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