



Messages that Matter

Positioning Experts in B2B Software Marketing

May your positioning strategy live long and prosper

By Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter

How long can you expect your positioning strategy to live? How long should you stick with the same strategy?

The quick and easy answer is "as long as it works for you." But that presumes that you can simply put your positioning on auto-pilot and it will take care of itself. It's not that easy, but a solid positioning strategy will last a lot longer than you might think. You can look forward to more than a year or two, even several years, if you are confident that your strategy is unique, believable and delivers a benefit that solves your target buyers' most pressing problem.

Quick read summary:

- An effective positioning strategy has staying power when it is:
 - unique
 - believable
 - a benefit that solves your target buyers' most pressing problem.
- It takes a long time to claim a position; stay with yours for at least 18 months, and ideally much longer.
- Your message strategy expresses a conceptual benefit, and does not need to be regurgitated verbatim.
- Challenge your ad agency to come up with a new creative execution of the same positioning strategy. Watch the fireworks!

That must seem like an eternity in competitive B2B markets where the dominant companies rarely stick with a message strategy for more than six to nine months. (Remember IBM's alien visitors in space suits? Now, it's guys with boxing gloves.) These expensive, short-lived campaigns are usually good in the sense that they repeat the message over and over. And repetition is one of the best tools for claiming a position. But then, just when the audience is starting to notice them, *poof*, they're gone. Often, the marketing department or the ad agency gets sick of them, and pulls the plug to make way for something new and fresh.

Patience is a virtue in positioning

Don't be hasty in pulling the plug. Be more patient, and you're likely to be rewarded. Depending on the frequency of your marketing message's exposure, give it nine months to a year for it to start to sink in and establish a mental space in your target audiences' mind. You'll be tired of your message long before your audience is.

When you feel it's time to break the monotony, challenge your ad agency to come up with a new creative execution *of the same positioning strategy*. Remember, your message strategy expresses a conceptual benefit, and does not need to be regurgitated verbatim. You can express a benefit in countless variations on a consistent theme, as long as the execution expresses the same benefit that solves your prospect's most pressing problem.

For example, Cognos has made the claim for several years that its software helps improve your decision making process. In the last two years, the message has evolved into the tagline "The next level of performance," which expresses the benefit that grows out of better decision making. The line appears in nearly all of Cognos' marketing communications. SAS expresses a similar benefit by providing you with the "power to know."

"The best run businesses run SAP," has been its positioning theme for several years. It's most current execution - companies that run SAP are 32% more profitable than those that don't.

Strong positioning gets more out of your ad agency

A strong positioning strategy helps focus and inspire your ad agency's creative people. For example, a company offering budgeting and financial reporting solutions positioned itself as helping you accelerate decision making throughout your company. A colleague of mine, a clever copywriter, executed the positioning strategy with a theme that packs energy and a call to action into plain language, "See how fast your business can run."

Another example of a core benefit claim - maximize the profit potential of your business - appeared in public as an advertisement with the theme, "No profit left behind."

Challenge your ad agency or in-house creative staff, and watch the fireworks. Just don't rush to unveil a new, creative execution of your current positioning strategy. The longer you wait, the more likely you'll be rewarded with exclusive ownership of an increasingly valuable property - your marketing position.

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.