



## **A positioning process helps product marketing managers do more** by Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter

At most B2B software companies, product marketing is being asked to do more with less head count. There aren't enough hours in the day to stay on top of competitive issues, customer requirements and the needs of product management. And let's not forget about marketing, the life blood of every company. If you don't market effectively, there's a good chance you won't sell enough product to make a profit, and we all know what that means.

So whether your product marketing managers spend too much time with marketing or not enough, you can resolve either problem with a formal positioning process. It's a way of cloning your product marketing managers by documenting all their knowledge relevant to marketing and sales, and then creating a standard way of describing products and their benefits.

### **A positioning process is essential**

While it's essential to have a positioning process, few B2B companies have a formal process, and as a result, resources - especially in product marketing - aren't maximized. Some companies get around the problem with marketing veterans who know where to go to get the information they need to create a brochure, a direct mail piece or an advertisement. They have relationships with the right people who can tell them what they need to know.

Other companies - naturally - lean on product marketing. But they don't always get optimum cooperation because of conflicting priorities. It's pretty hard for product marketing managers to justify devoting a lot of time to a marketing project when they face product-related deadlines.

The right time to lean on product marketing is when the high-level product requirements document has been completed. That's when product marketing managers begin to think about the launch of a new version of their product, and a revised positioning strategy. They have one less competing priority, and should be able to take an active role in the positioning process. That's when the cloning process begins.

### **The first step - do the research**

The first step in the positioning process is to do the research. The good news is that product marketing managers already have done most of the research as part of their job. To successfully position a product, you need a thorough understanding of customer problems, channel issues and how competitors are positioned. The answers to these and other questions become part of a rationale document for your positioning strategy:

1. What is your target market (size, type of company, etc.)?
2. Who is the decision maker you want to target your message, and what keeps that decision maker awake at night?
3. What pressing problem does your product solve for your prospective customer?
4. How is your prospect solving that problem today?
5. What specific benefit does your product deliver?
6. Why is your product better than the current solution and competitive alternatives?
7. Who are your key competitors, and why/when do you win and lose to them?
8. How do your competitors position themselves in their marketing communications including ads, direct mail campaigns, brochures and Web sites?
9. What makes your product unique in a way that is relevant to your prospect?
10. Are there any problems, unique challenges or special needs of your channel?

11. What do prospects and customers like and dislike about your product?
12. Do prospects and customers share your belief of why your product is better than the competitors'?
13. Are there any characteristics of a sales situation that indicate whether or not your product or service will be selected?

Now incorporate the answers in a rationale document. By doing so, all product knowledge is captured in one place, which can be used as a reference guide when marketing needs it as well as sales. The rationale document should be three to five pages and includes this information:

1. **Product Category:** Define the product's key features, advantages and benefits. A matrix can help clarify these items.
2. **Product Line Fit:** Describe how the product fits into the overall company product strategy.
3. **Situation Analysis:** Describe the conditions that justify the release of this product, including why the company believes it can be successful.
4. **Market Analysis:** Profile target market(s) by size, revenue, market segment, operational type or other relevant categories.
5. **Audience Analysis:** Profile key prospects within the target market(s), including job titles and functions (demographics) and their concerns, attitudes and behaviors (psychographics).
6. **Distribution:** Describe how the product will be distributed and the impact of distribution on product communications.
7. **Competitive Positioning:** Describe the key competitors, their targets and how they position their products.
8. **Positioning Statement & Rationale:** Evaluate the product positioning statement against four criteria (Is it important, unique, believable and usable?).
9. **Support Points:** Describe how the three support points make the positioning statement unique, believable and important. If multiple markets or audiences require unique support points, explain why.

A rationale document transfers important product knowledge to those who need to know, but don't have the time or expertise. It's especially useful when creating a product message strategy that includes a positioning statement (No. 8 in the rationale document) and three or four support points (No. 9).

#### **A message strategy is a time saver**

Your positioning statement becomes the central idea and theme underlying all marketing activities. It is a short, compelling declarative sentence that states just one benefit, and addresses the target market's No. 1 problem. It must be unique, believable and important, or the target market will ignore the message. Once you have found the right one, your product marketing managers won't need to be involved in every planning session for every marketing campaign.

Supporting benefit statements unfold the story in more detail. They also provide a structure for product demonstrations. While the positioning statement articulates a high-level benefit, the claims made in the supporting statements should be readily demonstrable. That is, in just a few steps, you should be able to show how the product delivers concrete benefits.

Make sure your message strategy has enough detail to support the creation of a standard product demonstration. This helps your product marketing managers create a demo quickly, and there's another benefit - the product detail in the support points answers a lot questions before marketing and sales ask them.

A message strategy also facilitates delivery of the same message across all marketing media including Web sites, brochures, advertisements and presentations to investors, industry analysts and prospects. A standard outline format makes it easy for writers and other communicators to see the message strategy's benefit hierarchy, and to take full advantage of it.

#### **A rationale document captures all the product knowledge**

In addition to documenting product knowledge, the positioning process improves marketing without intense, time-consuming input from product marketing. A message strategy is like the recipe for how to talk about your product. Follow the recipe - rather than ask product marketing - and your marketers can create a compelling, accurate story about your product.

This does not mean that your product marketing managers no longer need to be involved in the planning and creation of marketing materials. They should provide input when appropriate. It's just that it won't take up nearly as much of their time. That's because marketing gets most of its infusion of product knowledge by referencing the rationale document and message strategy. And that means your product marketing managers have successfully cloned themselves, and they'll have more time for other competing priorities.

**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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