



Messages that Matter

Positioning Experts in B2B Software Marketing

Positioning starts with a message strategy

By Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter

If positioning is one of the most misunderstood concepts in business-to-business (B2B) software marketing - and it is - part of the problem is that it can seem vague or difficult to develop and apply. Are we talking strategy or tactics?

Who can dispute the importance of positioning in a strategic sense - communicating the unique benefit of your software product? In *Crossing the Chasm*, Geoffrey Moore writes, "Positioning is the single largest influence on the buying decision." Obviously, he's talking about strategy, not tactics. Let's look at both.

A position is a mental space that you can "own" with an idea that has compelling meaning to the recipient. In that mental space, the product's benefit and the customer's most important needs meet, and hopefully form a meaningful relationship.

Moore describes a position as a buyer's shorthand for the best solution for a particular problem. What Moore and others haven't done is tell you how to go about establishing a position. Some experts say there's no formal way to position, no step-by-step method to follow to stake out that mental space. I beg to differ. In fact, that's exactly what our company, Messages that Matter, provides to our clients.

My partner and I teach a process, or methodology, that many companies have used successfully to greatly improve awareness and demand while reducing their costs of creating marketing materials. The objective is to develop a marketing message strategy that most effectively expresses your position. A strong message strategy will accelerate the marketing-sales process, because it will heighten awareness and convey the reasons that lift you into the top rank of the prospect's consideration set. From there, you're at least in shooting distance of making the sale.

Where to start?

To paraphrase the ancient Greek dictum "Know thy product - and your customer." Be ruthless. No wishful thinking, guesses or conventional wisdom. Eventually, you'll see the intersections between the truth about your product and the truth about your prospective customers. The positioning process is complete when you have developed a message strategy that accurately and compellingly describes your unique ability to satisfy your customers' problems and needs.

A solid message strategy, the foundation for all your marketing, consists of the positioning statement and three, carefully chosen support points. All four address key target market problems by stating a benefit; i.e. why the target buyer should care about your product, service or company. A message strategy can be extremely detailed and is like a recipe for all marketing communication. Follow the recipe, stirring the ingredients and taste testing as you go, and...voilà, you've got a dish that's hard to resist.

The positioning statement

Your positioning statement becomes the central idea and theme underlying all your marketing activities. A positioning statement is a short, compelling declarative sentence that states just one benefit, and addresses your target market's No. 1 problem. It must be unique, believable and important, or your target market will ignore you and your product. Here are examples of good positioning statements:

- "Microsoft Windows 3.0 transforms the way you use a PC."
- "Peoplesoft Financial Management Solutions make every employee financially accountable."
- "Microsoft Business Solutions - Navision® Financial Management frees you to focus on your business."

A good positioning statement easily adapts to various media - from magazine ads and trade shows to sales meetings and customer calls. It should be simply stated and works in every aspect of your marketing effort. So in summary, a positioning statement is:

- Short - a for fewer than 12 words (not counting product name)
- Simple, non-jargon language
- Adaptable to various media
- A compelling statement of the one big benefit
- A conceptual statement...not necessarily copy
- Supported by three additional benefit claims
- Satisfies four evaluation criteria (unique, believable, important and useable)

Support points

Once you've developed a positioning statement, you need to bolster it with three supporting claims. These benefit statements must satisfy the same criteria as the positioning statement itself and reinforce the importance, uniqueness and believability of the positioning statement. They provide the reason to believe the central positioning statement. Most importantly, support points must support, not compete with the positioning statement.

Use support points to unfold your story in more detail. They help explain your positioning statement, and answer questions like "how do you do deliver the promised benefit?"

Demonstrate your support

Supporting points 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.

Once you have developed benefit-oriented supporting statements, you can drill down into as much detail as needed to provide a platform for product or company communications. 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 your work. Here is where the tactical elements emerge that enables you, for example, to create ads targeting a special segment, or to stage a truly relevant trade show event.

The positioning statement, along with the supporting points and related detail, complete your message strategy. Now you need to execute it. Over and over and over.

A message strategy makes it easier to deliver the same message across all marketing media including Web sites, brochures, advertisements and presentations to investors, industry analysts and prospects. Repetition is one of the most important factors in claiming a position and giving it staying power. Remember, you'll get tired of your message strategy long before your target audience does. Give it a chance to work.

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.