



Messages that Matter

Positioning Experts in B2B Software Marketing

"So what?!" The big test of your positioning strategy

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Overview

A good positioning statement needs to be important, believable and unique or your target audience will ignore your marketing efforts. You can sum it up in two words: "So what?!" If the question pushes you to answer with a more compelling benefit, your first positioning statement did not make the cut.

A good reality check. Don't go out there without it.

Have you ever been in one of those corporate restrooms where there's a full-length mirror near the exit? That's for you to do a reality check before you go bounding out into public view. Believe me, a reality check is worth the extra bit of time it takes. But B2B software companies in a hurry to launch their new marketing campaigns sometimes forget to ask that simple, two-word test: "So what." Instead, market conditions lure even the most level-headed companies into a chest beating "we're the greatest" contest that can blow up in their face. Even if the results aren't disastrous, it's at best a lost opportunity to communicate what's really important to the target market and to gain some credibility credits.

Until recently, three of the major players in the enterprise Business Intelligence market did a pretty good job of delivering a benefit-oriented message to the market. But then the gloves came off in October when Cognos and Hyperion introduced new software that they both claimed to be the first and most complete BI platforms.

The power to know who's late.

This chorus of claims aroused the attention of a sleeping giant - SAS Institute. The oldest and most staid vendor in the BI space shot back with an advertisement that depicts two business men missing their train, and a sub-headline, "The Power to Know why other BI vendors arrived too late."

The way I read the ad, SAS is thumbing its nose at Cognos and Hyperion, the upstarts who are playing catch-up by finally introducing their BI approaches while SAS continues to lead the way. The ad then provides five reasons a buyer should talk to SAS about its proven success:

- Unmatched Enterprise Business Intelligence Platform
- Nearly 30 years of BI experience
- Undisputed leader in business analytics
- More than 4 million users at 40,000 locations worldwide
- At work in 94% of Fortune Global 500 companies

Ask the question, "So what?" and while one might answer "Gee, I'm impressed. SAS is a safe choice," but the more likely answer is "Who cares. I've got a business problem I want someone to solve." What's more, as any buyer knows, or will soon discover, both Cognos and Hyperion can make similar claims about market penetration and leadership. So there!

Give the buyer a break: Talk benefits.

Answer the "So what?" question before the buyer asks. Luckily for the buyer, Cognos and Hyperion chose to focus their advertisements on benefits. In fact, so did SAS until the aroused giant decided to flex its muscle, and beat its chest. Cognos gets kudos for spotlighting an important problem, and explaining its cause: your complex IT infrastructure has kept you from the promise of BI - e.g., better decisions. Finally, Cognos 8 Business Intelligence gives you a simple, complete BI platform with no limitations. "It's everything BI promised to be. And now it's here."

Cognos also gets good marks for its consistent execution of "better decisions," a benefit that, while far from unique, has been the theme of its powerful marketing effort over several years. Cognos also executes the same idea in its tagline that pays off the benefit of better decisions - "The next level of performance."

Hyperion's ad claims that Hyperion System 9 changes the landscape of Business Intelligence by integrating financial management and BI to create the first Business

Performance System. "Now you can attain performance visibility and take immediate action to solve business problems..." It's straightforward for IT to integrate, and "even simpler for end-users to learn and use."

As with almost all new product introductions, there's a nagging problem with both Hyperion and Cognos' ads. They make you wonder what kind of solutions they were selling previously. Incomplete? Old and antiquated? Unable to give you the information you needed to make good decisions?

Don't raise red flags in vain.

Let's give SAS some credit for raising the red flag, but it missed an opportunity to really set itself apart from the competitors by explaining the compelling benefit it offers compared to Hyperion and Cognos.

Instead, SAS joined all three vendors in what I call the "who cares" trap. We're the first. We're biggest. We're the best. We're the leader. We, we, we, we... These claims have their place as support points, because many buyers need that kind of reassurance. But they add up to just a lot of wasted advertising dollars in a market where there are four very strong, very well-known players. (Let's not forget about Business Objects, another BI giant.)

Stick to benefits that solve real problems

The best way to introduce new products, and effectively market existing ones is to focus like a laser beam on the key customer problem. Develop a benefit-oriented positioning statement that addresses this key problem, and then test it by asking "so what?" If your answer articulates a more distilled benefit statement, continue this line of questioning. Eventually, you will arrive at one important, believable and unique benefit. It will almost always be in one of these three categories: 1) Volume - helps you sell more, do more business. 2) Share - gain a competitive advantage. 3) Profit - make more money. Because these stripped-to-the-bone benefits might not pass the believability test, you may need to go back to the previous level (the last answer to "so what") and use that statement.

Let's do the "so what" test on some common claims in the market. Answer the question yourself and you are on your way to avoiding claims that don't matter to your target audience and homing in on ones that do matter. Put these to the test:

- Easy to use
- Better decisions
- Fully integrated
- Easy, instant access to information
- From proven industry leader
- Passionate users
- Real-time
- Innovative
- Unique
- We understand your problem

Most of these claims may have their place in the story you tell about your product, but only if they support a much more important and unique benefit claim. Some are so commonly used that it makes no sense to use them as the driving force behind your positioning strategy unless you happen to be a dominant player in your market, have been using the claim for years, and you are willing to stick with it. Just keep an eye open for competitors who may outflank you with a more direct, compelling benefit that wins the next heat in the "so what" sweepstakes.

Summary:

A positioning statement must respond to a prospect's primary problem. When it does, your positioning statement creates confidence in your ability to offer a desirable solution, one that creates a sense of urgency in your prospect's mind. Take the time to ask "so what?" When you can answer with a benefit claim that is important to your buyers, believable and uniquely yours, you can be confident you've found the right message for the market, and the market will reward you.

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.