



Your Web Site: Positioning Begins at Home

By Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter

It's self-evident that your Web site should express your positioning. However, that's only part of the story. In fact, your Web site is central to several steps in the positioning process, and becomes a pillar in the successful execution of your marketing plan. But you aren't likely to create a really compelling Web site with content that reaches out and touches visitors where they live - unless you have followed a comprehensive, step-by-step positioning process.

A good process results in a positioning strategy that sets you apart from the competition, and creates awareness and demand for your products. In this column, we'll explore the steps of your positioning process that involve your Web site, and the critical role it plays in one of the important goals of your marketing plan - to create a positive, lasting impression of your company and its products.

A company's Web presence has become one of the primary venues for prospects to learn about you and your B2B solution, whether it involves software, services or both. You can probably count on visitors looking you up on the Web and stopping by for a look before they decide to talk to you. Isn't that why you feature your Web address in the call-to-action in all of your marketing materials? You invite prospect to come visit, download a white paper, sign up for a newsletter, read a case study, take an ROI survey, etc.

Your Web site is an ideal testing ground

It takes a lot of time, effort and money to construct a Web site, but it can pay you back handsomely if you consider it as more than just a display case. It's the ideal place to test and fine tune a new message strategy. It's like a real-time testing ground (or in auto industry lingo, a proving ground), where you can rapidly evolve a new positioning strategy. With a responsive Webmaster, you can try out several different executions of your proposed message strategy on your home page, or on a special page that's not available to the public. Start with your best approach, and then fine tune it as key influencers - sales, marketing, management, customers, channel partners, etc., - provide input and feedback. After several iterations on your Web site, you should be close to a final message strategy, one that has been put through a rigorous series of feedback loops, all in real time.

Is your message strategy important, believable and unique?

Once you have converged on what you think is a winning message strategy, make sure it's important, believable and unique. You'll know for sure the answers to the first two questions from the feedback you have received while evolving your new message strategy on your Web site.

Now you need to check for uniqueness. Once again, Web sites - yours and your competitors' - play a central role in this step of the process. Is your claim unique? Hold it up against your competitors' Web sites, advertising campaigns, marketing materials and press releases.

Check competitors' Web sites for consistency

While you are at it, check for consistency, one of the most important factors in establishing a position in your market. Are any of your competitors wavering? Here's how I check for consistency. First, I evaluate competitors' advertisements. (You should have a file of competitors' ads; if not start one right away.) You may assume they reflect the company's current message to the market, so start there. If you've been saving ads, check them for consistency or a shift in claims, key words, tag lines, etc. Check the competitions' Web sites; what is the main message - if any? Is it in synch with the ads' message?

Next review press releases, which you'll find on your competitors' Web sites as well. Do they convey the same message as advertising campaigns, the home page, and other marketing communication such as brochures, product spec sheets, seminars, Web seminars and invitations to various marketing events?

If you compete with a company that delivers a consistent message in all its marketing communications, look out! You are dealing with a buttoned up company, and one that you can expect to be formidable. It's a rare company that recognizes the importance of first establishing a unique position in the market, and then pounding it home with precise repetition, so effective that it might actually stick to a portion of a prospect's mind.

Many Web sites fail; will yours?

Consistent delivery of your message is the most important factor in effectively positioning your company, software product or service. Yet it's surprising how many B2B software and services companies fail to execute their message

strategy on their Web site.

Many Web sites simply tell visitors what the company does, but not why they should care or explore more of the site. Some beat their chest, claiming they are THE industry leader, or A leader or THE best.

The worst home pages don't even give you a reasonable idea about what the company does. They are typically full of the latest jargon and techno speak. What's more, many companies try to stuff far too much content into every page - especially their home page. Even if a company has a consistent message, it may be buried in a lot of distracting clutter.

If you can't find a competitor's position on its Web site, it's a good bet the company has not thought much about positioning. Great! You've found a vulnerability you can exploit, because you are obviously thinking about positioning. That should give you an incentive to quickly create a new message strategy that you can test on the Web. There's no need to wait to give it final polish. Do that on your Web site too.