



Messages that Matter

Positioning Experts in B2B Software Marketing

Consistency and repetition - the keys to successful positioning

By Lawson Abinanti, Messages that Matter

It's that time of year when B2B marketers are either planning a new marketing campaign or they are getting ready to launch one. It's also the time of year when many of these companies make a strategic mistake that will prevent them from reaping the benefits of positioning. They change or "freshen" their message delivery, often for no strategically valid reason. They're afraid the message is getting stale; it's worn out; or they want to broaden or narrow their target audience.

Change is not your friend when it comes to positioning. Your friend is consistent delivery and repetition. No matter how clever an idea, phrase, or tagline, if you fail to deliver a consistent message, over a long period of time, it will fail to reap the benefits of product positioning.

Quick read summary:

- It takes at least 10 impressions before a target buyer even notices your marketing message.
- The only way to reap the benefits of positioning is to deliver a consistent message over long period of time; i.e., at least 18 months.
- A message strategy makes it easier to deliver a consistent message across all marketing activities including your ads, Web site, brochures, PR, etc.
- Competitors who consistently execute their positioning strategy are likely to be your toughest competitors.
- Failure formula - a multi-message campaign based on the theory that if you throw enough stuff at the wall, something is bound to stick.

Give your positioning time to work.

The goal in positioning is to help the target market associate a benefit with your product or company. With some effort, time and money, you can claim a position by consistently communicating an idea that has meaning to the target audience, and then repeating it, and repeating it, and repeating it...

Even a weak positioning strategy, consistently executed over a period of at least 18 months, is far more effective than a strong position that is inconsistently executed, and changes every year, if not sooner.

What do I mean by consistent?

I mean using the same, carefully crafted message strategy in all of your marketing communication. You say you don't have a message strategy. Then you need one! By creating a message strategy, it's easier for you to stay on-message across all marketing activities, including advertising, Web sites, brochures, public relations and presentations to prospects, customers, industry analysts, investors and, of course, key influencers.

And while you're doing that, keep an eye your competitors. Those with a consistent message are likely to be tough competitors. When evaluating for consistency, first check print advertisements, then direct mail or e-mail campaigns, then their Web sites, and finally press releases.

Some B2B companies do an excellent job of consistently executing their message strategy in high visibility marketing campaigns. Among the best include Microsoft Business Solutions (MBS), SAS Institute and Cognos, though MBS has a track record of changing every year, unlike Cognos and SAS. Let's see what MBS does in 2006. Nomination for worst goes to SRC Software, a recent acquisition of Business Objects.

For more than a year, SRC ran two ads in one important publication, and perhaps more. One ad claimed "control" as the key benefit. The other claimed better performance. A strategy that's sure to fail is a multi-message campaign based on the theory that if you throw enough stuff at the wall, something is bound to stick. Don't bet on it. And even if something does stick, how can you be sure it will have the greatest impact on your prospects?

Which is more important - repetition or consistency?

Although repetition and consistent execution go hand in hand, repetition is the stronger partner. Repetition - that is, repeatedly exposing the target audience to executions of the same message over an extended time - is perhaps the most important factor in claiming a position and giving it staying power. Judging from the antsy-ness, most B2B marketers don't realize that their target audience may not even notice their message before the marketers get tired of it.

According to colleague and writer Orrie Frutkin, former ad agency creative supervisor, a common danger facing marketing campaigns is that people in the company and ad agency who have been living with the concepts and executions for so long may start to think of them as worn out. In fact, he knows of a couple of campaigns that were deemed to be worn out even before they had run!

A rule of thumb is that it takes at least 10 impressions before a target buyer even notices an advertisement. Imagine how many impressions you'll need before your audience associates a benefit with your product. Which means you can save marketing dollars by continuing to use tools that still do the job, and haven't even begun to wear out (such as a message strategy and marketing communications that use it).

When you develop a message strategy, expect to live with it for a long time; ideally two to three years. Stick with it! Keep repeating and repeating and repeating. And be patient. Believe me, you'll get tired of it long before your target market even notices it.

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.