

The Positioning Statement: Why To Have One Before You Start Communicating

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One of the most profound statements made on the subject of positioning comes from Louis Carroll's Alice In Wonderland. When Alice asks the Cheshire Cat which path to take, he responds, "if you don't care where you're going, it doesn't make a difference which path you take."

From a management perspective, positioning is the heartbeat of an effective communications plan. A well-crafted positioning statement defines your company's direction. It answers seven essential questions:

- who you are ?
- what business you're in ?
- for whom (what people do you serve) ?
- what's needed by the market you serve ?
- against whom do you compete ?
- what's different about your business ?
- what unique benefit is derived from your product or services?
- It's surprising how few companies exist where management is in total agreement on these basics or where the answers can even be found ?

Don't confuse a positioning statement with market position. As Harry Beckwith states so clearly in his book *Selling the Invisible*, "A position (or statement of position) is a cold-hearted, no-nonsense statement of how you are perceived in the minds of your prospects. A positioning statement, by contrast expresses how you wish to be perceived. It is the core message you want to deliver in every medium." Don't get the two mixed-up. Remember, companies can't position themselves as anything. It's about what the market perceives them as standing for. Wishing it won't make it so.

So, how can you get your communications program on the right path? By creating a clear, defensible, differentiated positioning statement and supporting key messages to guide you and others along the way. In most organizations this takes introspection, selling and consensus-building.

Making It Happen

The following is a process for developing your company's communications direction (positioning statement) and path (key messages). The purpose of this is creating clarity, consistency and continuity in the way the organization speaks to the market. This makes all forms of communications less complex and easier to manage. Getting there takes patience, discipline, negotiation and above all an "outside-in" perspective. Because of that, a marketing or public relations agency can be of value in managing the project.

The Right Information

To start, you must have information. Recall the seven questions that a positioning statement must answer? For some reason many companies don't share business and (or) marketing plans with their PR managers. Plead, demand, beg if you must, but get a copy of these valuable documents. The answers should be in there. If business plans don't exist you've got lots more work in store.

The Right People

Enlist the right managers, those who most interested and involved in key company activities. Alert them to the need to participate in the positioning effort. These are typically the CEO, CFO, and VPs of marketing, sales and customer service. It's essential that those in key communicating roles participate in this process. You must get top management's "buy in."

The Right Thinking

Before your initial planning discussion, invest in and circulate copies of Trout and Reis' Positioning - The Battle for Your Mind to everyone in the work group. The best original work on the subject, it's a quick, inexpensive read that will help frame thinking about a very qualitative subject.

Next, outline the expected outcome and the benefits that communications consensus will bring and circulate in an e-mail or memo prior to the first meeting. The most understandable benefit is that time and money will be saved in developing communications tactics. The most strategically valuable benefit is more effective communications resulting from consistent, cohesive and differentiated messages building market awareness, thus helping achieve the company's desired position.

Generate Ideas

In the first work session (it's not just a meeting!) concentrate on uncovering issues, competitive and internal differences of opinion. Get people talking and discussing the seven key positioning questions in turn. Customer or prospect survey questionnaires can provide the outside-in perspective and realistic answers about the company's present position. Also be sure to examine and be aware of what key competitors are claiming about themselves.

An outside meeting facilitator, perhaps a senior agency person, should guide the discussion, listen and gather information. A second listener, note-taker is valuable to capture all the important ideas that tend to come rushing out.

One of the most important aspects of the positioning statement exercise is that all affected managers see and hear each other's ideas. It is only through this face-to-face process that understanding and consensus occurs. Use of marking pens and giant Post-It easel pads make collecting and displaying ideas easier. Try ensuring that every manager's ideas and thoughts are noted. Then as pages fill up, tear them off and hang them on the conference room wall for everyone to see.

Challenge Their Thinking

Remind managers that the goal is uncovering direction by defining what is real as well as management's ideal vision. This includes company and competitors' strengths, weaknesses, competitive threats, opportunities (SWOT analysis). What is being sought are reasonable and compelling supports (key messages) for a position versus competitors, not a position in a vacuum.

The hardest thing for many people to grasp is the concept of narrowing rather than broadening a company's focus. Trout and Reis' "Law of Focus" is very clear on this subject. Differentiation is essential. If management can't determine differences in the company, they need to look harder. Differentiating on price is usually a dead-end.

The desired result is a positioning statement and supporting messages that reflect today's reality and help move the company toward it's sought after, achievable, differentiated position. Remember, claiming to be "the leader" does not make it so.

Playing It Back

When the session is over, gather the noted ideas and use them to develop a summary and recommended positioning statement. The summary should focus on contrasts and similarities among ideas. Finding and incorporating competitive messages to illustrate available positions and claims is also helpful. Craft one or two positioning statements and a set of key messages (supporting statements) for consideration by the work group. Put all of this together and distribute it shortly before the second session. It is important that everyone see it before encountering each other again as a group. Hopefully, participants will come prepared with constructive ideas and intent on reaching agreement and closure.

The second session should focus on refinement and agreement on one positioning statement and a limited set of key messages. If management output has been unfiltered, then the proposed statements and messages should be close to the final product.

It's essential at this point for the session leader (agency, facilitator or marketing manager) to drive consensus and closure. Make careful note of agreements and modifications to the proposed statements and messages, again using the Post-It system. Ideally, the leader should publish the final language soon after the session ends to prevent an endless loop of iterations, changes, additions and more meetings.

Don't put the final recommendation out as an e-mail message or you'll enter a version control nightmare and perhaps never gain management team closure.

Now Alice, the path is clear

Finally, the company begins actively applying its new positioning statement to all communications (internal and external) - from marketing collateral to sales material, Web sites to press releases. This means that if communications do not support the sought-after positioning or do not include, reflect,

address or amplify the positioning statement and key messages, they are off strategy and not acceptable. Fair warning, getting managers to dump large supplies of sales material isn't easy. There are options - change high-profile materials first. This process should be repeated as market conditions require, semi-annually is customary - not monthly or quarterly.

This is what's needed to initiate an effective position-driven communications program. Advertising or direct marketing personnel should also be valued in the process. Their involvement ensures that they will support and implement the positioning statement and key messages.