

Positioning Is Everything

Idea In Short

Start every marketing strategy with positioning. The over-communicated world forces simplified minds, so win by simplifying the message, working with perceptions already in the prospect's head and owning a word if you can. Being first in a category beats being better in someone else's.

Start With Positioning

Marketing strategy is a vast, fun and exciting territory, and one idea stands as the first domino in that forest: positioning. The concept is more than fifty years old, dating to a fateful 1972 article by Al Ries and Jack Trout in *Advertising Age*, and it matters as much now as then.¹ Students asking for great marketing books usually hear about the classic *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, with a caveat born of rereading. You definitely need the concepts. You can skip the book itself, because forty-year-old examples read as anachronistic and hard to follow. Consider this a distillation that saves you the cover price.

An Over-Communicated World

The authors observed that the modern consumer, circa 1978, was overwhelmed with information and lacked the mental capacity to process everything. They called it an assault on the mind, and the phrase has aged perfectly. Too many choices force small consideration sets, and heuristics, the rules of thumb minds use to cope, mattered before cable news and matter far more now. Today most people cannot pay attention to a dinner conversation with their spouse, as the familiar image of two silent people staring at phones in a restaurant confirms. The chain of logic is short. An over-communicated world produces a simplified mind, and a simplified mind needs a simplified message.

Simplify the Message

Cutting through clutter demands clarity above all:

"In communication, as in architecture, less is more."

Albert Einstein made the same point about understanding itself: "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." Neither quote can be over-emphasized. Every additional claim in a message taxes a mind that has no attention left to spend, so the discipline of subtraction is the whole game.

Look Inside the Prospect's Mind

The counter-intuitive core of positioning tells marketers to stop pushing more information into a crowded head, an approach that is expensive, tiring and largely futile. Look instead for the solution already inside the prospect's mind:

"The basic approach of positioning is not to create something new and different, but to manipulate what's already up there in the mind, to retie the connections that already exist. You concentrate on the perceptions of the prospect, not the reality of the product."

The word manipulate grates, and the point stands. Positioning is about perception, and marketing is about them, not you. Two connections extend the idea. Positioning ties to strategy proper, since self-reinforcing activities that create sustainable advantage build an economic moat by being different, and strategy is famously about what you choose not to do. It also ties to Clayton Christensen's jobs-to-be-done thinking: customers hire products to perform jobs, as his milkshake story illustrates.² Ask what job your product uniquely solves, then ask how to communicate exactly that. Peter Drucker set the standard: "The aim of marketing is to know and understand the customer so well that the product or service fits him and sells itself."

Be First, or Choose Your Rung

The easiest way into a mind, the authors argue, is to be first:

"The easiest way into the mind is to be first. In advertising, it's best to have the best product in your particular field. It's even better to be first."

Simple minds build ladders of choices, and first place lets a brand own the category the way Xerox and Kleenex became generic names. Healthy skepticism applies. Being first sounds Pollyanna-ish, since pioneers face unknown customer tastes and heavy fundamental research and development costs. The authors answer with playbooks for everyone else: position deliberately as a strong number two the way Avis did, or position directly against the dominant brand the way 7-Up and Burger King did. The non-negotiable rule is knowing which rung you occupy in the customer's mind, because strategies built on an imagined ranking fail.

Create a Category, Own a Word

Ries and Trout largely oppose line extensions, the lemon-scented derivatives of existing products, and favor launching new categories where first place sits empty. Novice marketers will recognize the family resemblance to blue ocean strategy, which seeks new demand and makes competition irrelevant rather than fighting in the red ocean of win-lose rivalry.³ Taken to its extreme, positioning succeeds when a brand owns a single word. At a business school talk years ago, Al Ries asked an audience which word Volvo owned, and the room answered safety in unison. Asked which word General Motors owned, the room fell silent. That silence is what unpositioned looks like.

A Positioning Test for Your Own Firm

The concepts convert into a short diagnostic any leadership team can run in an hour. Ask ten customers which single word they associate with your company, and compare the answers to the word you intended to own. Scattered answers mean no position exists yet. Ask which rung you occupy on the customer's mental ladder for your category, and accept the answer even when it stings. Then examine your recent marketing spend and count how much went to pushing new claims into crowded minds versus retying connections that

already exist. Most firms discover they have been funding the expensive, futile approach. The remedy starts with subtraction: one message, one word and one rung honestly chosen.

The Creator Economy Proves the Point

The strongest modern evidence for positioning may be the creator economy. Individuals can now become a category of one, which explains the disruptive power of platforms like Substack and Patreon for writers, GitHub for coders, LinkedIn Learning for teachers, Etsy for makers and Spotify for composers. Each platform lets a person position uniquely rather than compete generically. The prudent close mirrors the authors' own advice about knowing one's rung: this is a strategist's reading of marketing, not a marketer's, so treat it as a starting point and go deeper with the same authors' 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing. The first domino, though, has not moved in fifty years. Position first, then build everything else behind it.

- 1Positioning (marketing)
- 2Know Your Customers' Jobs to Be Done
- 3Blue Ocean Strategy

Summary

Positioning remains marketing's first domino. Simplify the message for overloaded minds, work with existing perceptions, seek first place on the mental ladder or create a category you can own. The creator economy proves the thesis: anyone can now become a category of one.