

## Positioning: You need a business process to do positioning right



Positioning is done poorly by many business-to-business (B2B) software and technology companies. That's because few companies have an established business process for positioning. As a result, biases and personal preferences undermine positioning strategies.

If you can relate to any of these problems, it's time to establish a company-wide positioning process:

- You and your competitors claim the same or similar market position, known as “me too” marketing, which results in longer sales cycles.
- Management dictates positioning and messaging.
- Your positioning strategy is outdated.
- The sales channel ignores your positioning and comes up with their own.
- There's no internal belief in your current positioning.
- There is no current position that any two people in the company can agree upon.

You might wonder why positioning should be a company-wide process. After all, product marketing is responsible for creating the product message.

Sure, but how often have you heard people throughout your company grumble that marketing just doesn't get it? Sales is the most vocal critic, complaining that marketing isn't delivering well qualified leads or a compelling message strategy. Others complain that the latest campaign doesn't seem to hang together. [Click here to learn about the 3C's research you should be completing.](#)

### Positioning is a business process

A business process for positioning can help overcome these problems. Just as the accounting department has a process for closing the books each month, the marketing department needs a process for creating and updating the company's positioning strategies. The better your company becomes at the business process of positioning, the more successful your company will be, because it helps you make more sales by creating awareness and demand.

### Positioning takes time

A business process for positioning should involve many stakeholders. But doesn't that mean your positioning process could go on forever?

No, but it does take time to create buy-in, consensus and conviction with larger groups. Less time, however, than you spend haggling over content every time you create a new marketing piece. Invest the up-front time in a formal positioning process, and eliminate all those hours spent debating the message for every new marketing piece.

The time devoted to reviewing, editing and debating every new piece of marketing copy is what I call positioning-on-the-fly – attempting to learn to fly while the plane is in a nosedive. With so many opinions, beliefs and favorite benefits inserted into the copy, the message invariably gets watered down, and becomes inconsistent. There's no central theme or idea, nothing that locks in



### Definition of terms

*Messages that Matter defines **positioning** as the mental space in your target audience's mind that you can own with an idea that has compelling meaning to the target buyer. It's in this mental space where your product's solution to the target's most pressing problem meet and form a meaningful relationship.*

*A **positioning statement** is a short, declarative sentence that addresses the target market's most pressing problem by stating a benefit. It makes it clear why the target market should care about your claim and take action. Your positioning statement becomes the central theme for all your marketing communications.*

*A **message strategy** includes a positioning statement and three to four support points. The combination can be extremely detailed and is like a recipe for all marketing communications. Follow the recipe and you get a good dish.... a story!*

on the prospect's number one problem. Instead, the ad or brochure makes some tired and totally predictable claims, like "better decisions," or "insight," or "innovative."

The time spent on a disciplined positioning process concentrates the input and feedback where it can do the most good – in building a solid foundation for the position you want to claim in your market. It's also when you have the most time to listen to valid input and respond to criticism without the pressure of publication or production deadlines.

### **Positioning needs a champion**

Your positioning process needs an internal champion, ideally the person responsible for product marketing, because more positioning is done there than in any other marketing function. Also, product marketers know more than anyone in the company about what matters most to position effectively – a thorough knowledge of the product, customer and competition.

High visibility is one of the keys to implementing a successful positioning process. Stakeholders in sales, marketing and management need to become familiar with the process and realize how important it is. Armed with a 12-15 slide presentation, the internal champion's mission is to help stakeholders understand what positioning is, how to do it, and present the current message strategy for a product or the company.

A perceptual map that shows how you and your competitors are positioned will get stakeholder attention. Differentiation is a problem in many B2B technology market, so you may have the problem and stakeholders want to know why.

Tell them that a new positioning process is being adopted that will ensure the next positioning strategy will be unique because there's a way of testing for uniqueness.

Make it clear that their input and feedback is welcomed during the process because multiple perspectives are an important part of converging on the right position for your product, offering or company.

### **Positioning is a team effort**

Internal champions need a team behind them every step of the way. I'll lay out the step-by-step process in a minute, including how that team comes into play. For now, know that you need to bring together a mix of people and departments most affected by the positioning strategy.

[Read my blog about the importance of involving your channel in the positioning process.](#)

When those people understand there is a business process for positioning, and they have an active role in it, you're more likely to achieve the consensus and conviction necessary to claim a defensible position in your market.

Select a team with key members from product marketing, corporate marketing and sales, plus the internal champion. Add at least one "wild card," a strategic, creative thinker who understands your product, target customer and competition.

### **Put the harshest critic on your positioning team**

Select other participants, including your harshest critic, with the goal of achieving consensus during the process even if it is painful and time consuming. The harsh critic might be a marketing or sales person or a member of the executive team.

It may sound like herding cats, but there's a reason for enlisting difficult people on the positioning team. You're striving to discover reality – what's really going on in your market. "Difficult" people, with all their opinions, may know something that's invaluable, and they may better reflect what's going on outside the palace gates. Plus, once you get them on your side, they become valuable allies when seeking approval from others in the organization.

The process provides a measuring stick – a way to internally test and judge your message strategy. The process also provides a framework to explain why one benefit statement is more important than another. You need multiple perspectives to discern why some perceived benefits are compelling, and others are not really benefits but instead advantages, and usually just a slight advantage over the competition.

The work that results from the team effort is likely to reflect a thorough consideration of all positioning opportunities, and helps to break down the internal resistance some people have to any work other than their own.

*Support points unfold your story in more detail and explains how you deliver on the promise made in the positioning statement. "That's interesting, tell me more," is how you want your target audience to respond to your positioning statement. Good support points – three to four of them – will pique their interest.*

*A positioning strategy includes your message strategy and a summary of the research that helped you converge on your message strategy. To effectively position, you need to thoroughly research the 3Cs – customers, competitors and channel. This understanding of the Three C's leads you to a message strategy that is unique, important and believable.*



## The positioning process step by step

There are specific steps to implementing *Messages that Matter's* proven business process for positioning. This process has been taught to several hundred marketing professionals, stood the test of time, and helped many companies avoid the death trap of letting management whims affect their positioning strategy.

Here is a summary of the steps involved in a business process you can adopt that will take your positioning strategies to a new level of relevance and effectiveness:

### Step 1. *Research.*

Research your customers' needs and your competitive landscape by talking with people inside and outside the company, especially your customers. Knowing your customer's number one problem helps you to formulate the right positioning statement for your B2B technology product. Knowing your competitors' position helps you to choose a unique position that you can claim and hold onto long term.

### Step 2. *Brainstorm.*

Develop a list of candidates for your positioning statement. Brainstorming with your team provides a way to look beyond preconceptions. But for brainstorming to be an effective part of a business process, it must be structured and organized around specific questions about what problem your product solves, the benefit of solving it, and why your way is the best way to solve it. Informal feedback loops, which I'll get into in a moment, will spark new ideas from outside the team. Your job doesn't end with a list of candidates. You must do the hard work of selecting one positioning statement. There are no ties.

### Step 3. *Test and fine tune the positioning statement.*

The best way to test each positioning statement is to ask: Does it address the target audience's most pressing problem? Your positioning statement still needs to pass other tests. Your knowledge of the customer lets you objectively assess whether your positioning statement is relevant to the target audience, builds trust that you understand customer problems, and creates a sense of urgency. [Click here to see how many CRM vendors have missed this step – and how they are missing the mark.](#)

The final test is management approval (keep reading for why and how to get it).

### Step 4. *Execute consistently in all marketing communications.*

You've chosen one positioning statement that is important, unique, believable and usable (it adapts to all marketing communications). Now go out and use it! Successful message management requires consistency and repetition. Consistency will improve the effectiveness of your overall marketing program in the short term and create a leadership position in the long term. Repetition means communicating your positioning over and over and over and over. You're competing with thousands of other messages. Repeat yours often.

For more details about our business process for positioning, download our eBook: [“Positioning: How to talk so the market will listen.”](#)

## The feedback loops

Feedback loops, both formal and informal, make it clear throughout the company that the team is seeking a better positioning strategy, and at the same time helps achieve buy-in and consensus.

Initial feedback should be informal. As your team brainstorms positioning statement options, some team members can test ideas with colleagues, customers or a person in sales, product development or consulting, with a sharp eye for customer benefits. New ideas may emerge.

Formal feedback loops are more productive when the positioning team has conviction about its work. This is easier to achieve than you might think by using the following criteria to test your positioning statement:

- Is it Important? (Does it address your target's number one problem?)
- Is it Believable? (Does it “ring true” by referencing existing market conditions?)
- Is it Usable? (Does it work well in all marketing communications?)
- Is it Unique? (Are you the only one making this claim?)

**“Your target audience will listen when you speak their language by emphasizing that you can solve their pressing business problem. But they won't listen if you sound just like everyone else in your market.”**



When you can answer “yes” with confidence to all these questions, and defend the positioning statement with valid research, it’s time to begin formal feedback loops. Give those providing feedback the draft positioning strategy and sample applications of the message strategy.

Who should be in the feedback loop? Start with people who normally review marketing materials, and expand the circle to include sales, customers and others who can give you a realistic sanity check about your work.

Once you receive enough feedback to provide meaningful guidance, circulate one last “draft,” get input and create a final proposed positioning strategy for management approval.

### How to get management approval

By now, your positioning strategy expresses the knowledge and wisdom of key people in your company and customers. Team members have developed consensus and conviction that the proposed strategy is the best one. That’s because they have already defended or modified their strategy during the feedback loops, so they can stand up to any pushback from management. But the defense isn’t based on opinion or the latest burst of creative thinking, it’s based on hard evidence of its business value, and vetted by company-wide input and feedback.

Getting management to buy into the process is like a two-edged sword that cuts through and eliminates two problems. First it reduces the chances of management perpetually remaking the positioning strategy in real time. And it increases the chances that management will actually use the positioning strategy instead of winging it.

Create a presentation for management that consists of 12 to 15 PowerPoint slides that summarize the process step-by-step that led to the proposed message strategy. Present your positioning statement and briefly explain the rationale behind it. In addition, provide members of the management team with a three- to five-page document that summarizes your research.

Thorough preparation and conviction in the proposed positioning strategy are the keys to getting management approval. Conviction is an important result of a successful positioning exercise. It comes from following a process, knowing you have gathered the critical facts, getting extensive input and feedback, and being willing to discover an even better position at any time in the process.

### You’ll be ready to handle management objections

Without conviction, your proposed positioning is dead on arrival, or not long after management tears into it. That’s why having a business process for positioning is so important. It gives you confidence that you’ve explored and converged on the right position, because you can easily rationalize it. And you’ll already know the answer to that awkward question, “Why is this better than that?” Rather than just picking an idea – perhaps the latest fad position – you’ve finished a discovery process, weighed the evidence and come to a logical conclusion.

By gaining management’s approval as part of the positioning process, you solve one of the biggest problems in successfully positioning your products, services or company. Management is primed to deliver the approved message strategies instead of inventing their own. Everyone stays on message for maximum marketing and sales effectiveness – as well as for consensus, direction and peace within the company.

While it may seem counter intuitive to involve so many people in the process, doing so fosters buy-in that is essential when it comes to executing your positioning strategy. The process can be daunting at times, but the outcome – delivering a consistent, focused message that everyone buys into – is the easiest way to improve your overall marketing effectiveness. Try it.

Download this eBook that gives more detail about the business process discussed in this white paper: [www.messages that matter.com/ebook-on-positioning](http://www.messages that matter.com/ebook-on-positioning)

