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WHY POSITIONING RESEARCH FAILS

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Since Ries and Trout popularized the term 20 years ago, "positioning" has become a staple of MBA courses, brand strategy documents, start-up prospectuses...and not a little marketing research. Like many concepts, the flood of its currency has accompanied a dilution of its underlying value. We are frequently called upon to do positioning research, and we'd like to see every positioning study plan for three success factors:

- Good stimuli (that is, effective, discrete positioning statements)
- Integration of positioning statements with brand promise
- An understanding that positioning research must account for variability between different market segments if it is to be effective.

We often see ways that clients and researchers can be better prepared to meet these success factors. In this white paper, let's focus on the most pragmatic issue-the stimuli we use for positioning research, and the common mistakes we see arising from a syndrome we might call, "My baby is too precious."

THE PROBLEM OF OVERLAPPING POSITION STATEMENTS

When companies decide to evaluate positioning, the biggest decision they need to make – yet often the last thing they work on in the research process – is what they'll actually be evaluating. Crafting well-considered stimuli that cover the potential range of positions is the most critical part of the process – and not just the research process, but the broader marketing strategy as well.

Writing the stimuli a few days before the survey is due to go live or the first focus group will occur (let alone in the back room an hour before) is a sure sign that the process has gone awry. Drafting the statements should be one of the earliest steps of the research process.

Yet even when the stimuli are crafted well in advance, statements often suffer from the "precious baby" syndrome, resulting in overlapping positions that can't be tested well. Here's an example of what we mean, disguised for the sake of confidentiality but in no way exaggerated. Assume a digital camera maker wants to investigate two possible positions: professional quality (which we'll call Statement P below) and affordability (Statement A). How many times have you seen positioning statements used in research that look something like this?

Statement P: This reliable, easy-to-use camera will let you shoot digital video like a professional.

Statement A: This affordable camera will make it easy for you to film vivid video for years to

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come.

What's the problem with the statements above (and the other half dozen that are probably being tested with them)? The marketers think they're testing two underlying dimensions: professional quality and affordability. But these aren't the only dimensions being tested. Both statements actually offer a number of "positions," many of which turn out to be overlapping:

Statement P: Reliability, ease of use, quality results (through the proxy of professionalism).

Statement A: Reliability ("years to come"), ease of use, quality results ("vivid") and, oh yes, affordability.

A certain amount of fuzziness is inevitable because of the natural interrelationships of product benefits. Any position that speaks directly to a single benefit will inevitably summon some associations with related items on a benefits ladder. But the example above, like many of the positioning statements we see submitted for research, goes way beyond fuzzy.

PUTTING THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE: MESSAGING VERSUS POSITIONING

What happens when we actually test these statements? Let's say respondents prefer Statement P over Statement A overwhelmingly. Once we try to understand this preference, we're too often left without a clear understanding of what people are really responding to. Some who react strongly to P may do so because it better punches up ease of use and some may like it because it seems to put reliability front and center. Maybe a couple even prefer P because it speaks to professionalism (which was, you'll remember, the supposed dimension that P was originally drafted to embody)!

Because the statements are broad and so overlapping, an exercise like this ultimately explores not positioning so much as messaging. That is, we're comparing ways to talk about a reliable, easy-to-use product that offers quality results. This isn't a bad thing in itself...as long as we've set out to do messaging research.

We may even be able to draw some useful inferences about positioning. But we're making this a lot harder on ourselves than we have to. At the very least, in the traditional order of marketing events, we've put the cart (messaging) before the horse (positioning). More likely, a lack of clarity in thinking and stimuli has created a hopeless hodgepodge of marketing objectives. And try as we might to clarify this through research, fuzzy thinking in design is likely to come back to us as fuzzy research results.

THE "PRECIOUS BABY": POSITIONS THAT ARE TOO WELL-DEFENDED

Why does this happen so often? This (finally) is where that baby comes in: we love our products too well, but not wisely. Too often, marketers are unwilling to let the product stand out in the cold without the protective layers of what are essentially table-stakes attributes, like ease of use or reliability. The result is fuzzy, overlapping stimuli.

We've often heard clients defend the use of basic attributes, like "affordable" or "reliable," across multiple positioning statements because they are considered absolute market requirements within the category. Sure, no one wants a technology product (or any product) that isn't reliable. But that is precisely why we have to be willing to let potentially differentiating attributes be tested on their own, without the crutch of general goodness attributes.

Remember, one of Ries and Trout's requirements for an effective market position is that the position be unique to the brand. If we don't give potential positions a chance to "breathe" without table-stakes attributes, we may never learn whether there's a position for the product that better fits the client brand or creates more differentiation and opportunity within the competitive set.

We're not suggesting that the actual positioning needs to be a simple statement of a product's single, primary benefit. After all, every product is perceived in a multidimensional space in which numerous product, brand and audience attributes interact. Successful market positions can certainly be powerful composites of discrete sub-positions. But that simply isn't the best way to research them.

CRAFTING CRISP POSITIONS

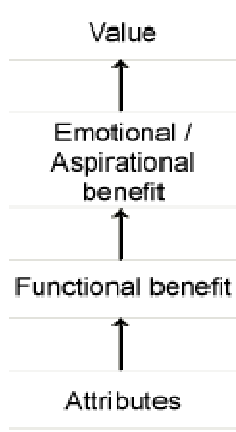
What does this mean from a practical standpoint? Here's what we recommend:

First, begin by generating a list of all the possible core positions you might imagine.

Next, take a good long look at that list and identify which of those positions are so inherently overlapping that they should be tested as a single theme.

Make sure when you render those positions into actual research stimuli that they remain discrete themes, allowing respondents to easily distinguish one from the other.

Finally, avoid wording or presenting positioning stimuli in a way that's likely to cause confusion with messaging among research subjects. Use of stale or florid marketing terms quickly signal "marketing fluff" to subjects and distract them from examining the underlying proposition.



Benefits Ladder

Admittedly, it's not easy to write a positioning statement that sticks to a single theme without seeming absurdly slim (no one wants to put a card that says "easy to use" in front of participants).

What we recommend is fleshing out each positioning statement to make it a more multidimensional treatment of the same theme. One of the best ways of doing this is to think back to the benefits ladder for your product category. Look again at where the position you want to test lives on that ladder and look for the spot just above or below that rung. What are the key functional attributes, for instance, attributes that serve as a foundation for that benefit? What are the aspirational benefits that your core position speaks to? Your choice as to which to use should be driven by two considerations:

Which do you believe speaks most directly to your brand?

Which best approximates the territory on which your key battles against the competition will be fought?

Let's go back to our camera example and work our way through the suggested approach. If Statement P is supposed to represent "professionalism," a logical way to flesh out this statement is by addressing the core functional attributes of the camera that support this claim: "The digital video camera that delivers the rich features and advanced optics that let you shoot like a professional." Now that the statement speaks purely to the issue of professionalism, respondents will focus their comments sharply on the subject-and they will be able to make clear distinctions between the relevance of professionalism and the equally well-defined attributes represented in the rest of the stimuli.

PRESENTING POSITIONING STIMULI IN REALISTIC CONTEXTS

Another technique we often recommend is layering positioning stimuli into a more realistic marketing context. Ultimately, however well your positions may be written, asking respondents to react to a number of code-lettered sentences on an index card or wall chart is an artificial task. This isn't the way marketers build and audiences receive marketing messages in the real world.

We've often found that we get more out of positioning exercises when we build the stimuli into a vehicle that the audience is comfortable assessing. Two good examples are hypothetical ad or package designs. These are both vehicles that people are comfortable assessing.

Respondents can often react more easily and realistically to a position when it's part of a presumed ad or package, as opposed to an abstract statement in a de-contextualized focus group or survey exercise.

Another valuable benefit of this approach is that it makes it much easier to transition the discussion of positioning into issues of brand promise (which, you'll recall, we emphasized as one of the three key components of any positioning research). There's little value walking away from positioning research with the conclusion that a particular position is ideal if it has little promise of working with your brand.

What if the competitor dominates perceptions of professionalism in the camera category?

After discussing reactions to the positions themselves, the conversation can naturally evolve into an examination of which brands work best and worst with each of the simulated ads or packages. Again, this is the kind of thought process that comes more easily for respondents when it's related to a context they know from real life.

When using simulated ads or packages as stimuli, it's important to keep all the non-positioning variables (e.g., graphics) identical between executions and to think carefully about

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whether any of them might somehow favor one position.

However, it's often easy for an agency to create a comp design that has only a few abstract graphic elements (e.g., no pictures of a certain kind of user, etc.), a couple of blocks of greeked text, and only the position as a varying element. The same can as easily be done for hypothetical front panels of a product package. In either case, you can protect that baby from the cold-without sacrificing the quality of your positioning research.

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