

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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“FAT-STRAT” TALK

The November 19th issue of *Brandweek* carried a guest editorial by Jacques Chevron, in which he proposed that the longstanding term “brand positioning” was in fact a misnomer, terminology that made no real sense. His reasoning went something like this:

- positioning is, by definition, “the *one thing* that will make a *product* most attractive when compared to its competitors”—the equivalent to a single-minded communication;
- but a *brand* “cannot be subjected to the Single-Minded Communication Principle” because brands are a bundle of complex meanings and values.

In short, his take on this most fundamental of marketing concepts was that *product positioning* works fine, but *brand positioning* is a kind of, well, oxymoron...two entities that just do not naturally go together.

While we disagree totally with his thesis (brand positioning is rarely “one thing” but usually a combination of a functional and emotional differentiation, the latter being a component Mr. Chevron completely ignores), his consideration of a common marketing term got us to thinking about how frequently we fall into “fat” strategic language when composing our Brand Positioning Statements and Creative Communication Briefs. You know, “fat-strat” talk—those terms that so easily roll off our tongues in discussions with our management or our agencies, but that, upon closer scrutiny, actually have many possible (and therefore potentially misleading) meanings...or worse yet, are simply devoid of any helpful meaning.

So, for this week’s Boats & Helicopters we have compiled a list of some of these fat terms, along with our take on what makes them that way.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

1. *Single-minded*—We might as well start with one that features prominently in Jacques Chevron’s article. How many times have you heard this hyphenated term in your marketing career? Bet you can’t count the number. We’ll also bet that when you’ve used it or heard it being used you’ve assumed it meant pretty much the same thing Mr. Chevron meant: focus on **one** thing. For example, a single-minded benefit would mean one benefit, right? Sure, the first word “single” means one; but it’s that second word “minded” that often fudges the intended meaning. So, you might hear someone assert (as we have) that Colgate Total has a single-minded benefit in its positioning: *the only toothpaste that provides total oral care and lasts up to 12 hours*. Hmmmmmm. With

that “and” in there it sure sounds more “double” than single-minded, doesn’t it? That’s exactly what makes this common marketing expression “fat”—do you really mean one thing, or more than one?

2. **Active/on-the-go people**—If only we had a dollar for every target statement we’ve seen with this label in it! Which in itself tells you something. When so many brand managers and agency account managers are including this description in her or his brand’s target, then virtually all targets must be active people. Does anyone really want to market brands to **inactive** people? (Okay, maybe marketers whose targets are ill and bedridden or who have a need to become more active.) The point is that this is language that typically brings nothing to the party yet it’s easy to insert in a positioning statement because, well, who can argue with it? But when we fall back on lame, empty-meaning expressions like these we really miss an opportunity to include language that **would** bring something of value to our understanding of the target—for example, usage or attitudinal segmentation language. One way to trim the “fat” from this overused expression—get specific behaviors down that are illustrative of just how active the target is.
3. **Secondary & tertiary targets**—Of course we all know the meaning of “secondary” and “tertiary”: *not primary!* We often use these words when setting objectives—for business, for our home projects, for our life goals. And those objectives that get labeled as secondary or tertiary are ones that we would like to accomplish once we have secured the primary objective. The clear implication is that secondary and tertiary goals are desirable but not necessarily essential. When applied to brand positioning or communication strategy targets, this same implication applies—but what makes things even more problematic, however, is that rarely (if ever) does anyone on the brand team insist on defining the relative differences among a primary target and a secondary target. Do we mean that our positioning efforts—particularly our marketplace investments to develop the positioning—will fall 60% against the primary target and 40% against the secondary one? Is it critical that 75% of the messaging speaks directly to the primary target and 25% to the secondary one? No one ever delineates these kinds of parameters. Face it, the term “secondary & tertiary targets” is a cop-out; the expression is fat language because the precise meaning is never clear. Actually, the expression more and more has come to be a kind of “code” for targeting just about everyone (usually when the team cannot make up its mind where to focus the brand’s efforts).
4. **Breakthrough**—Some language becomes fat merely due to abuse, or perhaps better said, due to overuse. Take the word “great.” It slips off our tongues so readily in everyday conversation that just about anything we experience or hear about qualifies as being great: “Let’s go to the corner deli for lunch. Great idea!” Or, “The dealer just gave me a great deal on a new DVD player.” Of course, we know neither of these experiences is really “great,” in the sense of the “Great Wall of China.” But the ubiquitous usage of the word robs it of its original, powerful meaning. When everything is great, nothing is great. That’s the way it is in marketing circles with a word like “breakthrough.” Ask yourself, what was the last marketing initiative—product, package, promotion, communication—that you would legitimately call breakthrough? Most people would probably agree that iPod was a breakthrough product; and others have often cited Nike’s “Just do it” campaign as breakthrough. Maybe we can reduce the fat in this word by simply being more honest—calling a strategy or initiative “breakthrough” only when it merits inclusion in the iPod’s or Nike’s company.

5. *Look of a leader*—You can sure appreciate how just about any brand, mega or niche player, might want to create the impression of being, well, greater in stature than it really is. Isn't that as basic a human nature? But, like some of the other fat expressions we've looked at this week, this one also suffers from overuse and imprecision. What, exactly, is the look of a leader? A certain swagger perhaps? Or maybe it's cleverly making a relatively small amount of marketing investment seem to be much larger. The point is, brands genuinely seeking to look like a leader (when they are clearly not the category leader) ought to specify the dimensions of leadership they're aiming for. Too often, we've observed, brands that include this expression in their brand character statement are actually *doing* very little to make a meaningful leadership impression upon their target. For them the expression becomes "fat" because they really are just talking to themselves.

Let us know what other "fat-strat" you're hearing out there...we know there's plenty more of it!

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