

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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PAPER TIGER POSITIONINGS

paper tiger (noun). One that seems dangerous and powerful but is in fact timid and weak: *“They are paper tigers, weak and indecisive.”* (Frederick Forsyth)

As the world nervously watches the nuclear brinkmanship emanating from North Korea, an old notion somehow comes to mind—that of the “paper tiger.” The phrase itself is actually an ancient one in Chinese, meaning something which seems as threatening as a tiger but is really harmless (“toothless” would be a good, common synonym in today’s usage). The modern use of the term seems to trace back to Mao Zedong, who in 1956 said: *“In appearance it is very powerful but in reality it is nothing to be afraid of, it is a paper tiger. Outwardly a tiger, is it made of paper, unable to withstand the wind and rain. I believe the United States is nothing but a paper tiger.”* Of course, few people would naively suppose that North Korea is nothing but a paper tiger; but you have to wonder at least a little bit just how much from the DPRK is real “bite” and how much is pure bluff.

We see a lot of paper tigers—not those related to the world of geopolitics, but to the world of brand positionings. Oddly enough, the meaning of the term applies equally well to this world of brand positionings. Indeed, many brand positioning statements we are asked to review and assess week-after-week are as flimsy as the paper they are printed upon. Whereas you would expect brand-builders to desire and to construct as competitive, as differentiated a brand positioning as they can for their brand, what you more often find is that they settle for a brand positioning that is, well, toothless.

What, specifically, are the earmarks of a “paper tiger” brand positioning? For this week’s Boats & Helicopters we offer a checklist of the typical toothless components. We urge you to use this checklist against your own brand’s positioning...and to make the commitment to adding “some teeth” where needed.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS—Characteristics of Paper Tiger Positionings

1. Going after Dead-end Target Groups. Dead-end Target Groups, as the name implies, are those that take a brand nowhere, that lead a brand down a blind alley. In most cases, they are enormously large, virtually all-inclusive groups of people, which almost no brand can effectively (nor efficiently!) position itself against. But what makes these groups even more insidious is that marketers typically articulate them in ways that appear, on the surface anyway, to be more precisely defined than they actually are. Here are some examples: *“Active Adults”*; *“_____ Concerned (as in Health-Concerned)”*; *“People Seeking More Control Over_____”*; and *“Category-Involved”*. Somehow these phrases are supposed to indicate

some considerable thought behind the targeting choice, or perhaps even some market research resulting in meaningful segmentation. But upon a second look, you can easily see how empty, how devoid of any useful information these “segmenting phrases” really are. Which adults these days are we excluding by going after only active ones? Those who are bedridden or in nursing homes? Likewise, who precisely is being eliminated from the group of health- concerned—the mentally ill, the habitually addicted? As for those seeking control, come on, this is the most overused and abused emotional need going these days (you see it in every category). Now “legitimate control freaks,” maybe there you actually have a defined psychographic segment a brand might try to own!

Besides these empty segments, there is yet another form of dead-end Target Group: one that is guaranteed **not** to stick with the brand for very long. How often do you hear new product marketers selling their management on a target of “lead adopters” or “trend-setters”? Using these labels is supposed to indicate a particular psychographic profile that the marketer wants to penetrate. Sure, there are some distinctive attitudes and behaviors that most lead adopters hold and exhibit...ones that the general populace does not. But, by definition, what makes these lead adopters who they are is their on-going need to get the next new thing. They typically don’t stick with anything very long.

In constructing a brand positioning with real teeth, we simply must get beyond these lame forms of Target Group definition. These are nothing more than the easy way out.

2. Identifying Only the Usual Suspects in the Competitive Framework. Quick. What’s the easiest part of any brand positioning statement to fill in? It has to be the one that is usually labeled the Competitive Framework, where the brand marketer is asked to fill in the blanks that read: “*(Name of Brand) is the brand of (type of product)*”. What could be simpler than filling in the second blank with the category or class descriptor? You know, like, “brand of facial tissue,” or “brand of carbonated soft drink,” or “brand of proton pump inhibitor”? But how does this add any competitive “teeth” to the brand positioning? When you consider that most, if not nearly all, brand users or prescribers already know this category or class label, what value does the marketer really add by filling in the blank?

There are actually two ways a marketer can add real, competitive value to a positioning to this part of the BP statement: identifying an *additional, previously un-recognized source-of-volume competitor* for the brand (for example, Gatorade going beyond conceiving other isotonic or sports beverages to include all recreational beverages, even water); and by inventing a distinctive *perceptual competitive framework* (again, such as Gatorade aiming to be perceived as “ultimate liquid athletic equipment,” or Zetia aiming to be perceived as the “early cholesterol blocker”).

3. Including Only Cost-of-Entry Benefits. Everyone knows what products in a given category or class can do (unless, of course, that category or class is totally new). Why then do we so often merely repeat what our product/ our category can do in the Benefit portion of the positioning? Why do we so typically see these self-same benefits in so many pharmaceutical brand positionings: “effective, tolerable, and safe”? How can any marketer honestly go with benefits as categoric as these and think she or he is going to market in a competitive fashion? It may not be humanly possible to ensure each brand in the company includes **only** differentiated benefits in its brand positioning. But no brand should go to market without at least one differentiating (real

or perceived) benefit. Look at Bayer aspirin and their positioning line: “*Bayer is the only leading pain reliever than can also help save your life.*” One benefit is categoric (the pain relief); but the other is differentiating (the heart-health). This is a positioning with some competitive teeth!

Take a moment and check *your* brand’s positioning statement: replace the Dead-end Target descriptors or labels with something truly insightful about your Target’s attitudes and behaviors; take the time to create a distinctive Perceptual Competitive Framework; and, for goodness sakes, consciously engineer in some real or perceived differentiation in the brand’s Benefits.

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