

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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POSITIONING “EYE CANDY” (OR, THE MEDIUM IS REALLY *NOT* THE MESSAGE)

A few weeks back we wrote about the growing trend in brand positioning development to add more concepts and components, rather than to go with the “classic” brand positioning approach—which typically comprises only 6 essential elements (Target, Needs, Competitive Framework, Benefits, Reasons Why, and Brand Character). And in that *Dispatches* we hypothesized about the various reasons behind the trend.

Following along this same theme, this week we would like to explore some pros & cons of an associated trend: the use of various icons or formats (such as pyramids and lighthouses and wheels) to portray or to capture a brand’s positioning elements. Recently, we have seen a number of our clients highly enthusiastic about these different formats; you could even say that some clients are genuinely captivated by their distinctive format. But while the shapes of the formats may vary, they tend to share one thing in common: they all contain more, not the same or fewer, components than the classic Brand Positioning format.

For sure, there is something appealing about a new or different visualization of something highly conceptual in nature; we’re always looking for ways to make things easier to comprehend, or at least, to find ways that everyone involved can use consistently. As the parenthetical reference in this week’s title notes, there is even a school of thought that says that the *medium*, or the way in which we choose to express or portray something, IS the message—meaning, the medium may be more influential than the content.

Perhaps you recall from your university days the Canadian educator who first popularized the notion that “*the medium is the message*,” namely, Marshall McLuhan. His work was most popular during the 1960’s and 70’s. And, in very simple terms, his famous quotation asserted that new technologies for expression of human thought—new alphabets, new printing devices, new broadcast methods, and so on—greatly affect the way people understand the concept or thought. He even went so far to say that these *media* affect the society that consumes them in a significant way.

Our intent this week is not to re-visit McLuhan’s theories (they’re much too mind-numbing). If anything, our intent is to suggest that, when it comes to articulating a competitive brand positioning, nothing—no shape, no format, no icon—is more important than the **content** itself. And, even further, our intent is to urge all of us engaged in the development and articulation of a winning brand positioning not to get too wrapped up in the medium (or should we say, “eye candy”) that some consulting company has devised as a different way to portray that brand positioning...and, let’s face it, to better sell their services.

Regardless of motive, though, there are some things to be said for new and different ways of visualizing difficult strategic concepts. So, for this week's Boats & Helicopters, here are few of the "pro's" we have observed—followed, naturally, by some of the con's.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS

The Pro's of New/Different Brand Positioning "Media"

- 1. If constructed right, they can contribute to the understanding of how well the component parts link.** One of the hardest things about articulating a brand positioning in words alone is effectively demonstrating or "highlighting" the critical linkages that make the brand positioning single-minded. Some of these critical linkages include those between the Target's Needs and the Brand's Benefits; those between the Benefits and the Reasons Why; and even those within the Target Group definition—such as the Psychographics, Attitudes, and "Telling Behaviors." In some of the pyramid positioning icons, though, we can actually better *see* those linkages and how the "base" of the pyramid (usually the Target definition) supports each of the component blocks above it.
- 2. Unlike all the other strategic documents, simple icon-formats stand out.** This seems an obvious thing, but it is nevertheless a plus. The Brand Positioning directs everything the brand does, from innovation moves to merchandising initiatives to promotion and, yes, communications. Because of this over-arching role, the Brand Positioning really does need to stand out from the "crowd" of other things. This standing out "look" can give the positioning strategy the added importance it deserves.
- 3. Along these same lines, a simple but distinctive positioning format can be more easily understood by everyone (Sales, R&D, Manufacturing, PR and so on) than word-laden paragraphs.** Again, because the positioning strategy directs all of the Company's investments against the brand, virtually everyone who works on the brand needs to understand it...so they will better invest whatever resources they have influence over. Maybe it's as basic as the age-old notion: a (good!) picture is worth a thousand words.
- 4. Though not always clear why this is so, a different but clearly-expressed positioning format often becomes a "must-have" for the brand's annual plan.** Anything that forces the inclusion of the brand's positioning (for senior management review and consideration) is a good thing. And it often happens that, with a distinctive layout, senior management more readily expects—even insists upon—seeing it as part of the official brand plan presentation.

The Con's of New/Different Brand Positioning "Media"

- 1. As already noted at the outset (and in our earlier *Dispatches*, "*Added Stuff Does NOT Equal Added Value*"), new formats tend to add parts.** For example, we have seen some that have a part labeled "Benefits" with another labeled "Core Differentiating Benefit." But, what then, are the Benefits that the brand will stand for—the ones that will meaningfully differentiate it from competition? The latter? If so, what does the "Benefits" part bring to the party? Having these distinctions ends up leaving decisions in

2. the mind of the beholder: if I work at your communications agency I may choose to communicate Benefit #2 in the Benefits part, while you expect me to communicate what's in the Core Differentiating Benefit part. The last thing you want in a brand positioning is the "blur" of too many choices.
3. **Icons that require more parts make the job tougher.** It's been our experience over 35 years (both as brand managers and consultants/teachers) that most marketers have a tough-enough time precisely and competitively completing the 6 essential elements of the classic Brand Positioning. Why insist upon more when even the "basics" are not completed well?
4. **Consistent with this line of thought, sometimes "sexy" icons end up being the end rather than the means to an effective end.** Call it the "wow" factor, or just the "eye candy" factor already mentioned. Just because you have a cleverly built brand positioning "lighthouse" does not mean that it shines very much light on the brand's direction. Said another way, too often these "no one has seen before" icons have a tendency to suggest to the team struggling with them, "Just fill in the box."
5. **And, despite what some senior marketers come to think, these icons do not by any means guarantee that their brand positioning statements are built upon better thinking.** The truth is, we all have a tendency to fall in love with our own *different* ways of expressing something. We resist the classic positioning format because, well, that's the way everyone else does it. And we generate additional components or different nomenclature for the same components as if fooling ourselves into thinking that these cosmetic differences carry automatic thinking differences. But, if we're honest, these stylistic differences rarely lead to competitive advantages.

You can probably guess where we come out, trying to weigh the Pro's with the Con's. But it may surprise you to learn that, actually, we are for whatever format works best to (a) get the 6 essential brand positioning elements done right and (b) makes it simple and easy for everyone in the organization to understand what the brand stands for relative to its competition.

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