

Positioning is Best Viewed as a Request, Not a Verb

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Positioning has long been described as an action that a company does, but this is a flawed premise as it presumes that an organization can fully control the position it holds.

Before elaborating on this inherent defect, I'll offer a basic definition of a position from a marketer's perspective. A position held by a company or brand is the place it holds in the minds of its target customers. Essentially, a position is whatever adjectives are used by customers or potential customers to describe the product, company or brand.

The mistake in stating that we, as marketers, position our brands lies in failing to appreciate that customers ultimately come to their own conclusions. If a position is a mental association held by the customer, a degree of success or failure will always be outside of our control - especially when the concept is considered on an individual basis. John Smith has one opinion or association with a product but Janet Jones has another. The seller is not able to guarantee reconciliation between their opinions or even guarantee that either person's views are exactly what is desired by the company.

A better way to approach positioning is to pay heed to the proposition part of the term "value proposition." Note that this simple phrase acknowledges that companies are proposing a way of offering something of worth. They are not dictating that value will be realized. It's a suggestion or, better yet, a request for acknowledgment from the marketplace. The company would not make this proposition if it did not believe it to be true, but that does not mean others will feel that the value exists.

Companies do not position themselves, their products or their brands. They merely ask for a position. This request will either be granted or denied by their customers.

This is not to suggest that companies are weak in this process. Their influence in creating an effective and desired position is tremendous as the likelihood of success in requesting a position is amplified by consistency in communications and actions.

Looking at one of the most cited examples of successful brand positions, we know that Wal-Mart might tout its everyday low pricing strategy in its advertisements, but the discount retailer would not be successful in its request for this position if it did not follow through with consistently lower prices. The fact that it might not be the lowest price on every item in the store is inconsequential when it is true often enough for its loyal customers to believe that they're saving money. Other potentially less obvious ways by which the retailer reinforces its positioning request are through layouts, store design, color schemes, etc. All visible cues tell its customers that this is a no-frills experience, thereby enabling them to save money.

Another common example of a successful brand is Apple, a company which is most commonly associated with innovation. Nonetheless, simply saying that the company is innovative or telling customers to "think different" is not enough to guarantee the loyal following of Apple enthusiasts. Instead, the company seeks to make its request through regular product launches and seemingly customer friendly advances in technology. If we reflect on the introduction of Apple stores and their layouts, there is little room for suggesting the company was anything less than innovative when it came to its retail format. Like with the previous example, there are clearly limits to this company's success in truly being innovative. Even its most loyal customers will acknowledge that one phone or another lacks in being much of a breakthrough compared to its predecessor model. Nonetheless, this suggests that a tipping point exists for customers to be willing to accept a request for a position if the request is made consistently.

Both of these examples are brands with strong contingencies of loyalists as well as their many critics. The existence of critics only reinforces the concept of positioning is a request and not a verb. The question becomes whether those critics would ever consider becoming customers. If not, the success of these and others companies' requests is best measured by the acceptance of their target markets and not by the marketplace at large.

While it might sound like grammatical semantics, appreciating that positioning is not a verb, and therefore not an action that a company controls, underscores an appreciation for your customers. In the world of positioning, there are two verbs at play: the company requests and the customer grants - at least if all goes according to plan.

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