

POSITIVE POSITIONING: 10 Steps to Achieving Standout

Uniqueness is the Holy Grail for marketers. Unique attributes can transcend clichés, giving products widespread respect. It's not always obvious what these traits might be, however.

Charlene Prounis offers a guide to making your product stand out in the marketplace

Striving to be unique is an age-old strategy for gaining advantage. Ideas, people, objects and products that are considered unique transcend clichés. As a result, they gain widespread approval and respect. In marketing terms, that translates into increased product uptake.

Positioning is the strategic process of analyzing a brand and identifying what makes it relevant and unique. When done well, it should result in a compelling perception of a product relative to its competitors'. A sound positioning strategy can then be used to facilitate creative communications. In general, positioning must achieve three critical goals: It must be relevant, it must be differentiating and it must be simple.

The challenge is distilling a set of complex and multifaceted ideas and facts into a singular compelling statement, essentially unearthing the insight that will make your brand most attractive in the market-

place. In the real world of competitive pharmaceutical marketing, all drugs have various attributes and benefits, many of which are attractive and compelling for different reasons. Therefore, the interplay between various products and their attributes can lead decision-makers to believe that all products in a given category are essentially the same. The goal of the positioning process is to pluck a product from the vast, undifferentiated sea of product sameness and place it in its own unique, completely differentiated niche.

Primary and secondary differentiators

Strategically speaking, if your competitor already "owns" efficacy-based positioning, then you should find another way to position your product. That being said, being pre-emptive is a good strategic approach. While several brands in the same class may all pos-

sess a certain feature, if you are the first to position your product based on that feature, you own it. For example, in the antihypertensive category, all available products are effective and safe, yet one may stand out because of its perceived tolerability based on primary positioning. While other antihypertensives may possess the attributes that would support a positioning strategy based on tolerability, if one brand already owns that positioning, then claiming tolerability simply becomes redundant.

Being first is unique and confers two major advantages: first, your product becomes synonymous with a particular attractive attribute—specifically efficacy, safety or tolerability; and second, your positioning-based reputation usually lasts throughout the life of a brand.

Positioning in a crowded class requires keen understanding of the class as a whole. For example, in the case of antihypertensives, differentiation based on secondary features is the key. The ability to position new products in this category, led by Norvasc, is enhanced by the fact that the fundamental goals of treating hypertension are related to numerous endpoints, including reducing the risk of heart attack, stroke and heart failure. Therefore, ARB antihypertensives can be positioned based on efficacy in preventing any hypertension-related endpoint.

As a class becomes more crowded, positioning becomes more specific and subtle. Also, there is more likely to be a focus on emotional or humanistic/quality-of-life benefits, in addition to the more concrete efficacy, safety and tolerability endpoints.

Of course, the issue of relevance remains important. One downside of positioning beyond the three core attributes is that secondary attributes and benefits are generally not the main drivers. Yet they can be influential, especially when large populations of affected patients can be segmented into various treatment categories. Then relevance becomes more population-specific, and a product can be differentiated based on its efficacy within that target treatment group.

The 10 steps to product positioning

As a rule, products that are poorly differentiated fail to realize their full growth potential and tend to lose market share over time. Unfortunately, the financial and opportunity costs associated with unoriginal, copycat positioning can compromise the momentum of highly effective therapeutic products in the marketplace. Although mimicry is usually unintentional, almost three-fourths

of all product positioning mimics competitor positioning. Developing a sound positioning statement is a highly creative process that is driven not only by ingenuity, intuition, and innovative thinking, but also by a smart strategy based on both quantitative and qualitative research. To be successful, you must be willing to adhere to an effective positioning methodology. Following are the key steps for product positioning.



POSITIONING STRATEGY: Efficacy

Product: Lipitor

Manufacturer: Pfizer

Claim: Lowers cholesterol most effectively

1 Conduct interviews with practitioners in your product's therapeutic niche to gain relevant insights. Preliminary surveys can be conducted over the phone. Present the product attributes to the physician and allow the interviewee to pick out what is most important to him or to her. Then you can start to answer questions that will help you formulate your positioning strategy. How is a given disease treated? What drives prescribing decisions? What are the unmet needs? How do physicians feel about the various available treatment options? Remember that physicians are constantly comparing products, because that is a critical part of their job.

2 Assess the competition. How are competitor products positioned? Do their attributes support their positioning statements? What are the key claims? How is promotion being handled? How do competitor products address the needs of prescribing physicians? Eventually, you should become so well acquainted with the competitive landscape that you can anticipate your competitors' next steps.

3 Develop a thorough scientific understanding of your product's clinical attributes and features. Gain a clear understanding of the therapeutic area, including treatment guidelines and algorithms and the factors that constitute therapeutic success. Work with Medical Affairs to decipher data and to appreciate subtle nuances that may facilitate product differentiation.

4 Conduct internal positioning workshops with your team. Start to parse and reconcile all of the information gathered during the "due diligence" part of the positioning process. Brainstorm and explore various positioning ideas for testing. The goal is to choose five to six different positioning options and start testing them. Be advised that you are testing different concepts—not iterations of the same one.



POSITIONING STRATEGY: Value

Product: Lescol

Manufacturer: Novartis

Claim: Low-priced statin

Breaking into the hormone therapy market

The marketing team of Product X, a synthetic conjugated estrogen therapy, faced a daunting challenge: launching into a market almost completely dominated by Premarin. The hormone therapy (HT) market exemplified an undifferentiated therapeutic area. Attempts to differentiate estrogen-based products were largely met with indifference, while previous efforts by competitors to gain share in this niche had consistently failed.

So how could Product X be positioned as relevant and unique? While HT has always been relevant, there has also been a lot of confusion over the safety aspects. In the 1960s and 1970s, HT was seen as a veritable fountain of youth. Though safety-related concerns became more prominent in the late 1970s, data in the late 1990s showed that HT was beneficial for the heart.

From decade to decade, women were eager to continue using HT to feel better and stay healthy.

Given the intense demand for safe, tolerable HT products, Product X could reap substantial gains in post-launch market if only it could be meaningfully differentiated.

The first step was to do online interviews with physicians to gain insight into the drivers of their HT prescribing habits. Preliminary research revealed that physicians prescribed HT in response to women's demands to not only relieve menopause-related symptoms, but to do so without side effects—and in the process to be rejuvenated. With that in mind, marketers researched and tested various positioning statements, focusing on several relevant characteristics, including the fact that Product X is a synthetic, plant-based, naturally occurring substance; that it is comprised of all of the essential estrogen components; that its synthetic formulation is a pure form of estrogen that closely mimics a woman's body; and that it is available in a low-dose and well-tolerated formulation that provides relief. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research, the team probed deeper to determine what mattered most to physicians and patients with the understanding that patients drive much of the demand in this category and that their emotional perceptions of a brand's attributes are as important as a physician's appreciation of its clinical features and benefits.

Stepping out of the 'Comfort Zone'

Using trade-off analysis, the team interviewed physicians to gain greater clarity. For example, respondents were asked which of the attributes mentioned above were most meaningful to them and what they could live without. Then the team used a paired ranking technique to encourage respondents to link features and benefits.

The results were stunning. On the surface, the assumption was that plant-based estrogens that are tolerable should be attractive to both patients and doctors because of the implied safety advantage of a "natural" product. But, based on research, what really mattered was that the product in question brings life back to you. It addresses a higher order of needs—to be revved up and functioning well at all levels. This by itself implies that you can tolerate the product. The creative concept chosen focused on "The Comfort Zone" and tied together the end benefit of living comfortably with a distinct product.

The positioning statement: "Product X is the first plant-derived conjugated estrogen containing all estrogens that provides full relief with an optimal tolerability profile—so you can go on living as before."

5 Create positioning statements. Good positioning often promises an emotional benefit, without stating it directly. For example, a promise such as, "Drug X makes people with Condition X feel better, because it's effective, safe and tolerable" would be unlikely to improve the perception of the drug relative to its competitors who make similar claims. Not only is this type of positioning generic and undifferentiated, but it also fails to generate an emotional response.

For example, several years ago, Merck achieved an ideal positioning strategy for Fosamax (alendronate) with the statement, "Fosamax helps you regain your independence." By focusing on the underlying emotional issues surrounding osteoporosis and the constant threat of fracture faced by women with low bone density, brand managers captured the essence of the indication. In response, sales of Fosamax increased dramatically. In contrast, the statement "Fosamax increases bone density," while true, lacks the emotional impact of a positioning statement that focuses on regaining independence.

Another example is the successful repositioning of Aricept (donepezil) whose positioning statement promises that patients with Alzheimer's disease who are treated with Aricept can stay at home. The underlying implication of the revised positioning for Aricept is that if "patients can stay at home" (and avoid institutionalization), their symptoms are being sufficiently controlled to allow caretakers to reasonably manage their care at home. This is a far more powerful message than speaking to symptom control or decelerated progression of dementia.



POSITIONING STRATEGY: Niche market

Product: Cenestin

Manufacturer: Duramed

Target: Women who take proton-pump inhibitors

6 Conduct qualitative positioning testing to provide a diverse range of subjective viewpoints about your product. Make sure to hire a market research company that knows how to conduct qualitative research. Market research specialists should be gifted communicators, adept at picking up subtle changes in vocal tone and body language. They should also enjoy interacting with interviewees and know how to engage them in a meaningful way. Starting with one-on-one interviews with physicians, discuss your product's profile and gauge physicians' reactions to your preliminary positioning statements. Make sure to choose a sufficient sample population in different locations to obtain a representative cross-section of practitioners. Again, focus on how relevant, unique and compelling the positioning statements are to the people you interview.

7 Uncover emotional connections to your brand. You can use various types of market research methods, such as personification, psychographic and ethnographic research among current and potential customers to uncover underlying emotional issues related to a brand and to gain insight into the subconscious perception of your product.

Using personification is a relatively new and extremely productive methodology. When using this tool, the moderator asks a series of questions that project a human aura onto your product, such as “Where was drug X born? Where did it go to school? What kind of books and sports does drug X like? While it may sound odd, personification yields unexpected responses that allow you to see how people perceive a product.

For example, researchers asked respondents about a leading drug indicated for the treatment of acute coronary syndrome. In response to a question about where physicians thought the drug had attended college, several respondents suggested MIT—making the marketer aware that the product in question was perceived as being technically sophisticated. Understanding this allowed the marketing team to build a successful positioning strategy that incorporated the concept.

8 Conduct quantitative market research to refine insights about your positioning options. Quantitative research, which adds a statistical dimension to your insights, helps clarify the effectiveness of your positioning strategy. Generally, quantitative market research can be conducted online.



POSITIONING STRATEGY: Convenience

Product: Boniva
Manufacturer: Roche/
GlaxoSmithKline
Claim: Once-a-month dosing

9 Craft the final statement and ensure buy-in from all internal stakeholders. Once you’ve analyzed the results of your research, it’s time to identify the winning position. During this stage, it’s important to keep in mind the importance of simplicity. Within any organization, detail-oriented individuals will probably want to add more content to the positioning statement, such as additional clinical data and specific product-related benefits and advantages (many of which your competitors may already have used as part of their positioning). Their reluctance to omit key product features is understandable but could undermine the goals of the positioning process.

Remind them that simplicity is the key to positioning success. All of the details can be integrated into creative copy later on. Once you have crafted the final statement and gotten buy-in, you can mobilize the

detail-oriented people as you move onto the final step. A very useful framework for crafting a positioning statement follows:

“Brand X” is the (add descriptor here, e.g., “only” or “first”) treatment for (indication goes here) that provides (benefit goes here) because of (state the reasons why).”

10 Write the creative brief. Once you have a viable positioning statement, you should write the creative brief to provide direction to the creative team. From a management perspective, the creative brief functions as the transition from strategic formulation to tactical implementation.

The role of market research in positioning

During the positioning process, the goal is to uncover hidden perceptions and emotions in order to gain insight and create the most compelling positioning possible. Often that insight will come in flashes of intuition, and throughout the positioning process, there are usually several instances of informed serendipity. However, these often occur after reviewing the results of market research or directly observing how customers respond to your positioning ideas.

Market research has evolved into one of the most creative parts of the positioning process. In fact, steps 1, 6, 7 and 8 are all focused on obtaining feedback from current or potential customers. Arguably, well-executed market research is the most important part of creating an effective positioning strategy. This is also the area in which creativity is critical, since insights gleaned from research can help you avoid duplicating positioning.

Although the preliminary research in step 1—establishing relevancy among physician customers—may seem rudimentary, asking the right questions is important, because even in the earliest stages of market research, there are hints of an emotional attachment to specific clinical outcomes. In the case of the HT product (Product X), the underlying emotional issue of regaining something that has been lost emerged as an important issue during the first round of online research.

While market research gives you a deeper and more dimensional understanding of your product when formulating your positioning strategy, remember that positioning is not static. While a positioning statement may work well for a time, there are clear signs when it’s time to reposition. These include lagging sales, new competitive entrants, market shifts, new guidelines and a shift in the treatment paradigm. In a dramatic fashion, the results of the Women’s Health Initiative, publicized in 2001, led to a large-rescale repositioning of all HT products, including Premarin. Nonetheless, the more you know, the better prepared you are to shift gears. Keeping a constant watch through regular check-ups enhances and informs your marketing choices and decisions.

A well-conceived positioning statement epitomizes simple elegance. But, simplicity and ease are often born of hardscrabble striving. Figuring out what makes a product unique and developing relevant positioning is a laborious process, but well worth the effort.

Charlene Prounis is managing partner and president at FlashPoint Medica