



POSITIONING AS CONTEXT

Context enables people to figure out what's important. Positioning products is a lot like context setting in the opening of a movie.

The opening scene helps the viewer quickly answer a list of basic questions that give context for the story about to unfold. Where are the characters? Who are they, and should the viewer love them or hate them? Is the story going to be sad or scary or funny?

Think of the opening scene in *Apocalypse Now*. You see a dense grove of peaceful palm trees swaying in the breeze. But then you start to notice some smoke coming from the bottom of the screen and a helicopter moves quickly across. The palm trees burst into flames as Jim Morrison says, "This is the end." The setting is no longer a beach in the Caribbean; it's a war in the jungle. The scene slowly shifts from the burning jungle to Martin Sheen's face and you realize you're seeing his traumatic memories. He's smoking, he's drinking, he's got a gun, and your mother would have something to say about the state of that hotel room. He walks over to the window and looks out, and you hear his thoughts. "Saigon. Shit. I'm still only in Saigon. Every time I think I'm gonna wake up back in the jungle." The movie is four minutes and forty-five seconds in, but you have enough context to know what it's all about. It's set in the middle of the Vietnam War, the main character has some serious PTSD, and if you thought this was going to be a two-hour laugh riot, you are dead wrong. Hey, they *did* warn you with the title. The opening scene

positions the movie so you can stop wondering about the big questions of where, what, why and who and move onto focusing on the story itself within that context.

When customers encounter a product they have never seen before, they will look for contextual clues to help them figure out what it is, who it's for and why they should care. Taken together, the messaging, pricing, features, branding, partners and customers create context and set the scene for the product.

Context can completely transform the way we think about a product.

A good example of this is the famous context experiment conducted by the *Washington Post*. The experiment involved Joshua Bell, an internationally acclaimed violinist, who at the time was considered the best classical musician in America. *Interview* magazine once said his playing, "does nothing less than tell human beings why they bother to live."

Joshua Bell regularly sells out concert halls where tickets cost \$300 or more. For this test of context, he would play the violin outside a busy subway station in Washington, DC, during the morning commute. Would people recognize Bell's extraordinary talent, or would they simply walk past him as they would any other street performer? And more importantly for the experiment, would he make more money than a typical street performer?

Bell performed for forty-five minutes. In that time, 1,070 people passed by, and of those, 27 gave him money, and only 7 paused to listen. His total earnings for the concert: \$32.17.

You might argue that the commuters of Washington, DC, may simply be late getting to work and don't carry change. Just because he didn't draw a crowd and he didn't make much money doesn't mean the rushing commuters weren't suddenly inspired to ponder the meaning of their lives.