

The Death of Positioning?

by Mark Joyner, CEO, Aesop.com

I always get a bit nervous when I start talking about the less testable theories of marketing. I call this "touchy-feely" marketing. I'm a real "show me" kind of person, and I will rarely make a statement about marketing without having tested a theory on real products I'm selling myself.

This is one exception. It would be quite difficult to test some of the ideas I'm about to put forth here. Nonetheless, it's an important concept that will change the way you think about your web promotion efforts.

For years it has been believed that for a product to succeed it must "position" itself properly in the mind of the consumer. Ries and Trout (the best known spokesmen of this theory) make a powerful case. They claim that the overall mass of information with which a consumer is bombarded every day makes it hard for him to remember any information at all.

However, the way our brain categorizes and stores information helps to determine which of these bits of information are remembered. The Law of Primacy, for example, states that it is easier to remember the first of any list.

For example, can you name the following?

1. Your first kiss
2. The first President of the United States
3. Your first day in your current house
4. Your first day at your last job

Now, try to name your second kiss, the second President, the second day... Do you follow? It's obviously much easier to remember the first. It almost goes without saying.

According to Ries and Trout, this phenomenon accounts for the success of many of today's continued successes. Coca-Cola, Levi-Straus, IBM.... These companies have a primary position in the minds of the consumer because they got there first.

Now, there is more to it than that (there are a great many other psychological factors that affect the position of a product in one's mind - see 1,001 Killer Internet Marketing Tactics for more details), but you get the general idea. This concept has been a decisive one in shaping the ad campaigns of the last 20 years. The only problem is, the whole field of marketing and advertising itself has been turned on its head by the Internet. The rules have changed. We have had the great privilege of witnessing a "paradigm shift".

A paradigm shift occurs when a new invention or discovery completely changes the way we look at the world. The Internet has not only caused a paradigm shift itself, but it is the catalyst of other paradigm shifts by increasing the rate at which we exchange information. So, we have to be willing to let go of certain beliefs when this occurs.

The million-dollar question is, is **Positioning** one of these concepts which we will have to discard?

My answer is a resounding "no", but there is a new concept that will greatly affect the importance positioning will play in determining who buys. The position of a product in one's mind will always have a great impact on whether or not one chooses to purchase that product, but, I propose that on the Internet, there is one single factor that is of even greater importance:

Timing

This states that the marketer must deliver the Right Message to the Right Consumer at the Right Time.

These days, when your average net consumer wants something, he wants it fast. For example, some time ago I was looking for a web host for one of our web sites (to protect those involved I won't mention any names). For various reasons, we had to move and we had to move fast. I really didn't want to have to spend a lot of time talking to prospective companies. I just wanted to get the site up and running on a new server so we didn't lose traffic. An acquaintance linked me up with a company that reportedly could get the job done quickly and do it well. There were even a few things that bothered me about this company from the start, but I was assured all would be well.

I hate to admit it, but I'm just plain lazy. We decided to go with this particular company because of the Timing of the whole deal. At that time, this was more important than a company name. There were a number of big name companies that had a better Position in my mind, but that just didn't matter. The decision was a mistake, for sure - one I will always regret - but, it is the decision I made at the time. This inferior company got my business because of timing.

Now, if one of the big name companies had been there at the right time, there is almost no doubt in my mind that they would have received my business. But they weren't. So, in this case, Timing was more important than Positioning. If you spend a few moments thinking about this, you'll surely find a few examples in your past experience where this theory has held true.

Now, here are a few ways that you can apply this principle to your online business:

1. Offer Speedy (If Not Instant) Fulfillment

Have you ever had to make a decision between two similar products - one that could get it to you right away and another that would take a few days? Personally, I've chosen products of lower quality based on their delivery times. (OK, now you know. I'm lazy and impatient. But, you'd better love me. I **am** Joe Six-Pack.)

2. Find the Right Consumers in the right place

There are places online where people ripe for your product are hanging out right now. Seek those places out and get your message there one way or another. An obvious example would be someone searching for your type of product on a search engine. Or, perhaps you sell saddle-soap and there is a forum or newsgroup all about horse saddles. Maybe you offer rare books and you find someone that owns a newsletter dedicated to rare book finding. These are the places where you want to get your message seen.

3. Create the Right Time

Sometimes you get the Right Message to the Right Consumer, but at the wrong time. Maybe the consumer just isn't ready to buy right now. That's no problem. Create a sense of urgency by explaining what would happen if the consumer didn't purchase your product today. What would they stand to lose? Do this and it will become clearer to them that the right time is now.

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