



# Brand Narratives

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Positioning in the time of media fragmentation

**DDB<sup>o</sup>**

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## Introduction

**A relevant and unique ‘position’ is critical to brand differentiation, but new technologies, new media channels and increasingly savvy consumers are challenging traditional conventions. This has profound implications for how a brand’s position is defined, developed and managed.**

Brand positioning has been an important part of marketing since companies began to exercise control over their image. While the connotation of the words ‘brand’ and ‘positioning’ has evolved over the years, companies have long recognized that consumer perception is key to their success and growth so they have managed their communication accordingly – though not always successfully.

Developing an appropriate ‘position’ (a primary marketing objective) is usually directed by such factors as the competitive marketplace, specific corporate goals and organizational strengths. It is often a process driven by the desire to find a unique position among your competitors as well as to satisfy corporate sales directives.<sup>1</sup> Once established, it has typically become a rigid posture that shapes corporate communications. There is also a continual obligation to ‘live up’ to the position and to “develop the necessary product/service programs to ensure consistent performance,”<sup>2</sup> reinforcing the foundation of the original position.

This current process, as well as the concept of positioning itself, is being called into question by a number of important voices in the marketing community. Many find that the brand positioning model needs to be a much more fluid, consumer-driven process that better reflects advancements in media and communications technologies and a rapidly evolving marketplace. The static corporate-driven models are antiquated, self-serving and not responsive enough to the increasing demands of today’s hyper-competitive global market. Other voices feel positioning as we know it was never a solid concept. There is evidence to support all these opinions and good reason to look for a new approach to positioning.

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In the *Demise of Positioning*, Nick Wreden, Managing Director of Asian consultancy FusionBrand, argues that looking to own one of the top positions in a category is an inherently flawed concept. It forces a company to search for a unique position or to create a new category, neither an easy task in highly competitive, rapidly changing markets. “Branding must be driven by your customer demands for value, not by the market timing of competitors.”<sup>1</sup>

Larry Light, Chairman-CEO of Arcature Consulting and former CMO McDonald's, declared “an end to the out-of-date, simplistic concept of brand positioning; that marketing lock-box that locks brands into uni-dimensional, uni-segment, monotone marketing. Instead, we are adopting an up-to-date, multi-segment, multi-dimensional marketing approach... We adopted a new communications approach called ‘Brand Journalism’... where no single communication tells our whole multidimensional, multifaceted brand story. Each individual communication provides a different insight into our brand.”<sup>3</sup>

In his book *Differentiate or Die*, published in 2000, Jack Trout recognized that differentiation takes place in the mind of the consumer, writing, “If you understand how the mind works, you’ll understand positioning.”<sup>4</sup> Today you need to understand the individual mindsets of your many target consumers who all have the resources to let you know exactly what they are thinking.

Clearly the approach to conventional brand positioning is being challenged by innovative marketers who regard it as an imperfect concept. What are some of the many factors that have precipitated this change?

## Market Evolution vs Positioning

Brand positioning is still a fundamentally valid concept. However, we at DDB firmly believe the concept and its application need to be re-examined in light of a vastly new and evolving marketing environment.

Not so long ago our media environment was a much more finite and more manageable universe than it is today. Consumers were not completely passive participants, but their media options and influence were relatively limited. There were an embraceable number of TV and radio networks and print titles. From a marketing perspective, we were all part of one large audience that shared many similar tastes and viewing experiences. This was a time when you could share common media viewing experiences at the 'water cooler', long before there was TiVo or YouTube or even broadband internet connections.

Recent advances in technology and internet development have opened many new media venues and introduced consumers to a nearly unlimited number of information, entertainment and distribution channels.

This torrent of new media pipelines has given consumers the option to move from traditional mass media networks to niche channels offering content more in line with their individual interests – from special interest cable or print networks to personalized media networks with content like individual songs, specific TV episodes or particular articles.

Complementing the proliferation of media selection is the extension of media platforms which allow consumers to not only personalize their content but select the most convenient 'display' device as well. You can now watch TV or movies on your iPod, your cell phone, the web, through TiVo, your video game player or Video-on-Demand, whenever and wherever you want, often skipping or eliminating commercial interruption.

**As technology and bandwidth continue to increase so will available media channels and platforms. The consequences of this media fragmentation include:**

- many smaller more 'vertical audience segments' comprising more psychologically cohesive consumer groups – and many fewer opportunities to share experiences at the 'water cooler'
- dramatic changes in media consumption with multitasking reducing attention levels
- increasing clutter resulting from more competing media and delivery alternatives
- accelerating technologies to eliminate the clutter and to control media delivery
- growing influence of each channel and its audience on the message itself

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## The current highly fragmented media environment calls for an adaptable positioning which can be extended to communicate the brand to many different audiences that each view the brand from its own perspective

“America today is a far more diverse and commercially self-indulgent society than it was in the heyday of the mass market. The country has atomized into countless market segments defined not only by demography, but by increasingly nuanced and insistent product preferences. ‘All the research we’re doing tells us that the driver of demand going forward is all about products that are ‘right for me’, says David Martin, president of Interbrand Corp. ‘And that’s ultimately about offering a degree of customization for all’.”<sup>5</sup>

The music industry is a good example. Writing in *The New York Times*, David Brooks points out that rock and roll was once a cohesive force that could fill huge arenas. “There are now dozens of musical genres ... but there are almost no new groups with the broad following or longevity of the Rolling Stones, Springsteen, or U2.” Music used to “span social, class and ethnic lines ... not so much anymore.”<sup>6</sup>

With many new media channels and platforms, the potential for variation in audience segmentation, competitive framework and viewing environment make the traditional simplistic, static, corporate-driven positioning statement somewhat anachronistic and perhaps irrelevant. The current, highly fragmented media environment calls for an adaptable positioning which is more responsive to a much broader range of audiences, media platforms, media channels and competitive exposures – a cohesive positioning ‘narrative’ which can be extended to communicate the brand to many different audiences that each view the brand from its own perspective.

In fact, brand narratives can also help address the influence of environment and media on the message itself. Marshall McLuhan’s 1967 warning that “The Medium is the Message” presciently noted that the type of media we use will profoundly affect our interpretation of the message and therefore our thinking. Today’s complex web of media channels and venues represents the ultimate extension of McLuhan’s theory and a great case for adopting strategic approaches to communication that permit more control over the message by medium and audience.

In her 2007 paper, Kathy Hatzis summed up the marketing situation we face when she said: “...historically the media puzzle only had a few pieces that fitted together in a limited number of combinations. Now, the media puzzle has hundreds of pieces that fit together in an almost infinite number of combinations, continuously evolving. And it’s driving marketers crazy trying to figure it out.”<sup>7</sup>

## Consumer Authority vs Positioning

The escalating role of the consumer in marketing, afforded by all the new media and direct marketing technologies, has probably had more influence on brand positioning than anything else. "We have gone from a linear marketing universe where marketers communicated and consumers listened within a limited number of media channels to a holistic marketing universe where companies and consumers converse with each other on a nearly unlimited number of channels, platforms and media venues."<sup>8</sup> In fairness, consumers have never been totally passive, nor insignificant participants in the marketing process, but recent advances in technology and the internet have greatly enhanced their active involvement.

This new universe has created an entirely new marketing dynamic between company and consumer and between consumer and consumer. Media technologies and social networks have opened so many new lines of communication for sharing information that companies have ceded exclusive control of the marketing function, giving consumers a much more influential voice in the process. Consumers now have more information on companies, more access to competitive information and their collective influence plays a much more pivotal role in marketing decisions. And when all companies open new lines of communication and more actively engage their consumers in the marketing process, every company is more receptive to change, and the entire market becomes as vibrant, volatile and capricious as its consumers.

Chuck Brymer, CEO of DDB Worldwide, recently wrote, "Whether through social networking communities or a simple email address book, the power of one can overnight become the power of 10, 20, 200, two thousand, two million, multiply yet again or disperse. Like fish or a flock of birds in motion, they can change direction instantaneously and as one in a coordinated movement called swarm behavior. These human swarms can wield tremendous influence for or against causes, ideas, beliefs or even brands."<sup>9</sup>

This situation is particularly acute for larger companies where consumer influence is disproportionately large. Wal-Mart is a great example of consumer influence on brand management of large companies. Google the name 'Wal-Mart' and you will not only find the official Wal-Mart website but many other consumer-driven and special interest sites devoted to exploring the pros and cons of the Wal-Mart company, the brand experience, its policies and other issues created by the company's interaction with its consumers. The internet and its many new media venues have given a voice to the many consumers and groups who in the past may not have had a public forum to share their concerns and influence public opinion and brand perception.

The perpetual exchange of information and empowerment of the consumer usually make for very competitive markets. Consumers are continually re-evaluating companies and companies are continually re-evaluating consumer perception of themselves, their products and their competition. It is a very vibrant market where companies have an uninterrupted flow of consumer feedback with which to adjust their communications programs, product line and brand positioning.

This vibrant, information rich market requires frequent analysis to stay current and a positioning model with the flexibility to respond to abruptly evolving market conditions and consumer demands. A static corporate-driven positioning in this situation would make as little sense as a static product line that did not respond to consumer feedback on new trends, new designs and new competition.

Going forward, the viability and competitive leverage of many companies will hinge on marketing models and positioning strategies that are responsive to much more volatile, consumer-driven markets and the many nuances that distinguish their many individual target segments.

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## Consumer intelligence vs Positioning

Research, product savvy and personal values, empowered by information technologies, are also challenging conventional 'positioning' as key factors in decision-making. The internet is quickly becoming the primary venue for window shopping and most consumers acknowledge their predisposition to scour the internet for bargains and competitive information prior to making a commitment to buy. While the majority of purchases remain in bricks and mortar facilities, often discovery, differentiation and decision first coalesce on the internet "More than 90 percent of people aged between 18 and 54 told America's Online Publishers Association in a survey that they would turn to the internet first for product information."<sup>10</sup>

# Research, product savvy and personal values, empowered by information technologies, are also challenging conventional 'positioning' as key factors in decision-making

The internet provides a means of assessing the mind-numbing array of available products. Consumers have demanded more choice and companies have responded with special products for nearly every individual. The fragmentation of the consumer product market is as difficult to address as media and audience fragmentation. There are literally millions of brands from millions of companies vying for attention in stores and especially on the internet. However, only a small fraction of the total will ever be household names, even in the smallest communities.

Given the scope of available products and the power of the internet in the selection process, position still plays an invaluable role in differentiating products and building brand loyalty.

However, as audiences corral themselves into smaller and smaller psychographic segments, a static positioning would be stretched to align with the many market and competitive segments that need to be addressed. A realistic, consumer-driven position which can extend a singular, cohesive identity to address many different mindsets, is much more relevant and engaging. Product savvy consumers have an innate sense of what is and what is not a realistic corporate promise. The importance of striking a balance between market demands and corporate limitations increases along with consumer intelligence.

## Relevancy vs Positioning

Brand positioning is about relevance and relevance is very personal. It can be different for every consumer in our multichannel, multimedia, multiplatform market.

According to McKinsey & Company, “Most customers have a very specific definition of what the brand is and what it can be relative to their frame of reference.”<sup>2</sup> The challenge facing brand positioning is to maintain a relevant “frame of reference”<sup>2</sup> when addressing consumers across many marketing, media and audience channels.

Relevancy is important in all aspects of marketing but particularly to the brand position as an escalating number of companies and brands are all competing for the attention of the same consumers with very similar marketing messages. Articulating a unique and appropriate positioning is difficult enough in a highly competitive market; finding the means to maintain its relevance among many distinct consumer segments, all exchanging information and introspectively re-evaluating their personal and collective opinions of your brand, that’s the Holy Grail.

How is relevancy achieved in this environment? Instead of ‘one’ phrase or position statement across many different segments, relevancy is achieved by extending a ‘positioning narrative’ – a positioning concept – case by case to reflect each niche market and each respective media channel. Relevancy requires the flexibility to dress the same positioning in the clothes of each consumer group while continually keeping your eye on fashion trends. Relevant communication will elicit consumer interest with messaging that is both narrowly targeted and socially, culturally and intuitively relevant.

The concept of a ‘positioning narrative’ may be familiar to the international marketing community experienced in extending a global brand strategy to local markets, each with its own culture, language and social context. As a result of audience fragmentation, most domestic markets are now not one but a network of many very different audiences, some as different from one another as one country is from another. Similar to extending a global brand to local markets, a ‘brand narrative’ seeks to communicate a unified brand position to audiences who may be psychographically very different, whose understanding and usage of the brand may be very different, and who need to be addressed in a very different ways. The ultimate goal is to achieve the same brand position among all audiences.

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## Accountability vs Positioning

Unfortunately it is difficult to quantify the direct benefits of an adaptable, consumer-driven positioning strategy over a traditional corporate-driven positioning.

Arguably, one of the many drawbacks of any positioning is its lack of direct, quantifiable measurement vis-à-vis traditional benchmarks such as awareness, market share, preference and others. Positioning is a very subjective, qualitative concept that can be interpreted in many ways and conveyed in many forms – marketing, personal transactions, word of mouth, press, reputation, etc. Ultimately it is the cumulative set of experiences with the brand, versus other brands, that combine to form the consumer's mind share (share-of-mind). A positive mind share enables the important relationships that bond consumers to brands and drives many of the more measurable benchmarks such as awareness, perception, share-of-market and, of course, sales.

Though mind share can be 'qualitatively' measured, like most measures, it is very difficult to exercise in this new media environment. Many narrow media channels and psychographically defined audiences defy traditional demographic segmentation and sample size requirements.

There is also no consistent methodology or measurement currency to conduct research across many different media channels and platforms. Lastly, even if all other issues could be resolved, it would be difficult to effectively measure and analyze the influence of an adaptable positioning strategy executed across many different audiences, media channels and platforms. The conundrum, therefore, is that the same new digital and interactive tools that raise media transparency and accountability also create a psychographically fragmented social environment that precludes easy measurement.

Accountability aside, there is growing support for the positioning narrative as an extremely effective approach to branding in a fragmented market. Unfortunately, the direction of marketing programs and corporate strategy is often dictated by the results of the more traditional research and measurement tools that can provide quantifiable results and have an established equity in the C-suite.

## Consistency vs Positioning

While narratives permit a more liberal, flexible expression of the brand position, consistency of direction, message and promise remain important. Strict strategic compliance, however, must be tempered to reflect the brand's evolving role and respective interface with different consumers, cultures and competitors. This approach is known as Constancy of Purpose and it attempts to establish a balance between the articulation of a brand, its core purpose and existing market conditions.

Jeff Swystun, Director of Corporate Marketing, DDB Worldwide, notes this approach "advocates consistent direction but acknowledges there are infinite large and small touches one can employ to follow that direction when building a brand and interacting with customers."<sup>11</sup> Jeff believes that about 70 percent of brand strategy should adhere to firm guidelines while 30 percent can be more interpretive. "Unchecked [strict] consistency cannot help in these days of audience fragmentation, new media and technology, new measurement, and new methods of using traditional media. This is a time of unlimited creative opportunities that increasingly demand brand flexibility because of the 'Rubik's Cube' of choices in channel management."<sup>11</sup>

## New 'Positioning' Models

Customer-driven positioning narratives are gaining traction both in practice and in the press. Larry Light, former CMO of McDonald's, calls the approach 'Brand Journalism', while Nick Wreden, author of "The Demise of Positioning"<sup>1</sup>, feels a better term would be 'Brand Wikization'.

McDonald's global marketing policy is referred to as 'Freedom within a Framework' and Larry Light credits this approach with McDonald's worldwide business turnaround and with the success of the 'I'm Lovin' it campaign'. "Our core principle is that we define the framework at the center, but the creative implementation is locally."<sup>3</sup> Ideas, he says, can come from anywhere. To restore brand relevance across McDonald's many local audiences, positioning is approached as an exercise in 'brand journalism', communicating the "brand story in a contemporary 'brand journalistic' manner."<sup>3</sup>

Nick Wreden concurs that: "...McDonald's is definitely on the right track with 'brand journalism' but... a better term for this customer-driven strategy that reflects today's branding realities is 'brand wikization'<sup>1</sup> – a name derived from 'wikis', inferring a collective judgment through a collaborative worldwide effort.

# Customer-driven positioning 'narratives' can address many diverse audience segments across fragmented media channels

These customer-driven positioning 'narratives' can address many diverse audience segments across fragmented media channels. Regardless of the terminology, this type of approach sets up the positioning as a broad narrative, a brand positioning framework from which relevant storylines can be written to extend the brand to many narrow audience segments each addressing the language, culture and social context of its respective audience. In place of rigid positioning statements, customer-driven brand positioning narratives permit companies to better align their messages with smaller, more defined, perhaps more local, consumer segments and to deliver more germane and engaging communications.

There are other opinions on positioning. Adam Morgan, in his book, *Eating the Big Fish*, suggests an alternative model that has contributed to the success of many "Challenger Brands": second-rank brands that had demonstrated growth in the face of powerful and established leaders."<sup>12</sup> It is an approach that is not so much consumer-driven as idea-driven; as much strategy as attitude and behavior. Challenger Brands build 'Lighthouse Identities' that do not attempt to position themselves in terms of the consumer, rather they calculate "...every marketing action to tell us where *they* stand... who they are."<sup>12</sup> These companies are highly intrusive, intense and emotional. They "...do not tend to succeed through the satisfaction of rational needs; instead, through a Lighthouse Identity, they invite a realignment of emotions."<sup>12</sup> Apple is such a company.

## Conclusion

Our ability to 'control' brand perception is diminishing relative to the increase in media fragmentation and social connectivity. While implementing a well-crafted brand strategy and maintaining a consistent brand message across marketing, transactional and incidental touchpoints are important objectives of corporate marketing, they are increasingly difficult to achieve.

The role of the consumer has changed the traditional dynamic of brand marketing. In a fragmented media environment, the ubiquity of competitive intelligence, interactive media channels, transactional interfaces, social networking and 'rating' sites has given the consumer a critical role in defining the brand and its social currency. And the larger the company and the more recognized the brand, the greater the influence and control relinquished to the consumer.

Brands have always been defined by consumers, but their perception of the brand was heavily influenced by mass marketing programs and the in-store transaction environment. Today brand marketing has ceded much of its 'control' to consumers who are influenced by only the most relevant brand messages because they have access to much more information on the competitive environment and a more impartial, objective perspective of the company, its services and products.

In this market the price of entry is an exceptionally competitive product or service. Not even the best marketing communications programs guided by the best positioning can counter the online exchange of consumer-driven animus generated by a bad product. Decades ago the late Bill Bernbach, a founder of Doyle Dane Bernbach, said: "A great ad campaign will make a bad product fail faster. It will get more people to know it is bad." Imagine how true that is today.

In the end, a consumer-driven positioning narrative is an important step but only one of many steps. The positioning narrative must be integrated in a comprehensive brand communications strategy which can untangle the new media puzzle and create positive mind share. It must deliver a realistic and socially relevant message that can entertain, inspire and emotionally engage consumers in the context of unique relationship-building experiences.

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