

DOES POSITIONING HAVE A PLACE IN THE MINDS OF OUR STUDENTS?

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Positioning is one of the most powerful marketing concepts. At the beginning, the meaning of positioning was rather limited, focusing on the concept of reputation. Then it became "the place a brand occupies in the mind of its target audience". Under this meaning, many companies have implemented the concept of positioning as a part of their everyday marketing activities. Nowadays, positioning is being used as a tool for explaining how consumers relate to foreign countries. The concept of positioning is simply too important to be ignored, but does it have a place in our students' minds? This paper aims to determine whether we have an evolution or an involution in this matter.

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Conceptual framework

The concept of positioning is strongly linked with the process of trade. The exchange of goods and/or services between two or more merchants has taken place since the beginnings of civilization, as opposed to marketing which is considered to be a 20th century science. The explanation of this paradox is rather simple. Positioning was one of the marketing elements that had been used since the early days of trade. However, back then its meaning was rather limited, focusing on the concept of "reputation". All the merchants wanted to have a good reputation and to stand out with something: the best products, the widest range of goods, the most famous/important clients. Nevertheless, it's impossible to conclude that the ancient merchants were using the concept of positioning, as those actions were not part of a thoroughly planned and constantly implemented marketing activity.

Further on, at the beginning of the 20th century, marketing emerged as a science due to the accumulated social and economic progress generated by 19 centuries of turmoil. However, we can clearly conclude that this isn't the birthday of positioning. This concept is not typical of the first two stages in marketing's evolution, namely the orientation towards production (1900-1930) and the orientation towards sales (1930-1950). This is due to the fact that the concept of positioning cannot support a theory who's doesn't put the consumer on the first place. Therefore, the concept of positioning is typical of the orientation towards marketing (1950-1990), thus setting its birthday in the second half of the 20th century.

The word "positioning" was introduced by Jack Trout, an advertising executive, in his 1969 article published by "Industrial Marketing" and "Advertising Age". A few years later, in 1972, he teamed up with Al Ries, another advertising executive, in order to write an article called "Positioning cuts through chaos in marketplace", also published by "Advertising Age"⁸⁴⁸. This was only the beginning of their lifelong struggle aimed at establishing positioning as one of the most important concepts in marketing.

⁸⁴⁸ Enis, Ben, Cox, Keith - "Marketing classics: a selection of influential articles", Ed. Allyn and Bacon Inc., U.S.A., 1988, pages 410 & 420.

Their first struggle was about the meaning of positioning. Usually, when a new concept appears, there is more than one opinion about its content.

For instance, Alpert and Gatty considered that positioning is the differentiation of brands by studying the ways in which their consumers differ as well as how consumer perceptions of various brands differ⁸⁴⁹. Their approach is wrong because positioning is not presented as a process which unfurls in the mind of the consumer and its result is a classification of brands. Further on, Houston and Haneski thought that positioning can be most easily described as a promotional strategy which attempts to place a brand along one or a number of dimensions relative to other brands in the same generic class. No matter what dimensions are employed, positioning is essentially a strategy used by the marketer in an attempt to find a niche for his brand⁸⁵⁰. This is clearly a narrow definition concerning positioning. This concept has a strong influence on every P in the marketing mix, which means that it's much more than just a promotional strategy. Positioning is a key element not only when looking for a market niche, but especially when confronted with strong competition. From the management standpoint, Biggadike believed that positioning is a decision to serve a particular segment with a program tailored to those specific customer needs⁸⁵¹. Unfortunately, we can identify here a confusion between targeting and positioning.

Nevertheless, after a few decades of debate the Ries & Trout definition of positioning was unanimously accepted. The story goes like this: a company identifies a set of different needs in the marketplace, targets those needs that it can satisfy in a superior way, and then selects and communicates a position which is relevant, effective and consistent with the company's offering and image. Positioning is the act of designing the company's offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market. The result of positioning is the successful creation of a "customer-focused value proposition", a cogent reason why the target market should consider buying the product⁸⁵². If a company does a poor job of positioning, the unavoidable result will be a generalized confusion. On the other hand, if a company does an excellent job of positioning, then the rest of its marketing planning should come along smoothly.

Their second struggle was about implementing the concept of positioning in the daily business practices of every organization. This is yet to be realized. Nowadays, there are still organizations which go straight from identifying the need to marketing mix, without considering and choosing from the number of positioning alternatives. There is also the other side of the coin. There are already many organizations which use positioning as a weapon to undermine the competition and hypnotize the consumers. All the successes and failures that were recorded on the business stage can be easily explained using the positioning paradigm. Even the fact that many authors have written books about positioning using plenty of practical examples is, in my opinion, enough of a reason to be optimistic about the future of positioning. There is still work to be done in order to clarify the role and ease the implementation of positioning in every organization. There is also a need for improved marketing research methodology for positioning studies. A good progress in this area has been made by Marco Vriens and Frenkel Ter Hofstede⁸⁵³.

Nowadays, positioning is being used as a tool for explaining how consumers relate to foreign countries. Before even considering this, we must ask ourselves: is really positioning a concept that can be applied

⁸⁴⁹ Alpert, Lewis, Gatty, Ronald – "Product positioning by behavioral life-styles", published in "Journal of Marketing", U.S.A., 1969, page 65.

⁸⁵⁰ Houston, Franklin S., Haneski, John F. - "Pooled Marketing and Positioning", published in "Journal of Advertising", U.S.A., 1976, page 38.

⁸⁵¹ Biggadike, Ralph E. - "The contributions of Marketing to Strategic Management", published in "The Academy of Management Review", U.S.A., 1981, page 624.

⁸⁵² Kotler, Philip, Keller, Kevin – "Marketing management", Pearson Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2006, page 310.

⁸⁵³ Vriens, Marco, Ter Hofstede, Frenkel - „Linking attributes, benefits, and consumer values", published in "Marketing Research", U.S.A., 2000, page 4-10.

to nations? Not only that the answer is yes, but it's very important for any country to make a coordinated effort regarding its position in the public's mind. The international image of a country is the central element which determines the position it occupies in the mind of the public. A country acquires a position in the mind of a person very much like any other product does. During its life, a person uses a multitude of sources in order to accumulate information about a country. Upon interpreting this information flow, a person builds and constantly updates the image of that country. This position is very important, as it will determine the person's future attitude towards that country and everything related to it⁸⁵⁴.

My research

We undertake this research for the second year in a row. One could ask which is the force that drive us to start this research series? The answer is quite simple: it is our opinion that the Marketing Faculty's syllabus should incorporate positioning and give it a place worthy of its importance. Unfortunately, at the moment positioning is barely mentioned throughout the core marketing courses. Our goal is to measure the results of this situation and to analyze them from a multiannual perspective. In order to guarantee the validity of our findings, we chose a full research. Thus, all the 3rd year students were asked to fill in a questionnaire concerning the positioning concept.

First of all, we wanted to see whether our students know the meaning of positioning or not. We're not doing that by accident. Previous research have shown a lack of knowledge on this matter. Besides that, if all the students would know what positioning means, there would be no need for further study regarding this concept. Thus, we discovered that only 23% of the students don't know the meaning of positioning. We believe this result to be encouraging, having in mind that an impressive 77% are familiar with the concept. We are further encouraged by the slight improvement of the results, when compared with the 2009 percentages. Still, the results show the need for an in depth study regarding positioning.

Second of all, we wanted to see whether our students know how to measure positioning or not. If a student knows what positioning means and how to measure it, there is no need to further study this concept. The results are surprising, to say the least. Thus, we discovered that 83% of the students are unaware of the fact that we can do this by using a positioning map. Is it possible for someone to know the meaning of a concept, without knowing how to measure it? We believe this is possible only when students receive less than the minimum amount of information about a concept. This paradox will be eliminated when students will undertake a thorough study concerning positioning. An additional concern is that the results are poorer than the 2009 percentages.

Third of all, we wanted to see whether the students know which is the positioning's place in the strategic marketing planning process or not. If a student knows what a concept means, how to measure it and where to insert it in the overall picture, there is no need to further study that concept. Unfortunately, the results are disastrous. Only 16% of the students know the correct answer to this question. Equally disastrous is the fact that the results are poorer than the 2009 percentages. This situation is a more than enough reason to accept the need for a distinct place for positioning in the marketing faculty's syllabus.

Last but not least, we wanted to see whether the students themselves perceive the need to further study the concept of positioning or not. When students receive less than the minimum amount of information about a concept, most of them become aware of their lack of knowledge. Thus, we discovered that only 5% of the students think they don't need further training on this subject. 44% of the students want to know more about positioning, by making it a chapter in the marketing introductory course. The rest of 51% believe that the presence of a "Positioning" course in the marketing faculty's syllabus is highly

⁸⁵⁴ Popescu, Andrei - "Re-positioning Russia towards the Eastern European countries", published in "Proceedings of the 6th International Interuniversity Scientific Conference: Russia and modern world, problems of political development", Russia, 2010, page 119.

desirable. We believe that these percentages speak for themselves. More than half of the students are aware of their lack of knowledge and are seeking additional training concerning positioning. Based on this research, we conclude that students need to further study the concept of positioning. It is our belief that this need should be addressed sooner rather than later in order to fulfill our main objective of delivering skilled practitioners.

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