

Positioning For Success: Who Are You and What Are You Trying To Do?

By Ed Newman

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FROM THE MARKETING DESK

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According to military historian David Chandler the campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte consistently rose above the expected. For more than 20 years Napoleon showed genius and skill as a general on the field of battle.

To what did Chandler attribute Napoleon's great string of successes? First, he was a master of translating theory into action. And second, in addition to being a man of action Napoleon was not concerned about being original. He borrowed from history, developing and perfecting the ideas of others.

Napoleon made no secret of this secret of his success. "Read and meditate upon the wars of the great captains," said he. "This is the only means of learning the art of war."

Success in marketing is precisely the same. There is no need to re-invent the wheel, the chariot, or the smart bomb.

Marketing successes and failures are well documented. Books on marketing are abundant. Those who read them, and learn what is valuable through trial and error, action and evaluation, will become increasingly powerful.

THE SEARCH FOR SILVER BULLETS

In my two decades of experience thinking about marketing related problems, a number of observations have impressed themselves upon me so that they have now become personal marketing principles. Among these I include the well worn maxim, "There are no silver bullets."

I know that a lot of business people wish there were indeed a silver bullet, a top secret marketing tip that they might be privy to. This would help them find relief from having to do any further homework, any further study or thinking or work.

When you stop and think about it, virtuosity in any endeavor is the result of a hours of practice, preparation and sweat equity. Some people have natural abilities, but unless sharpened and honed

the most gifted musician, athlete or sales professional will falter. Applying oneself to think from a marketing point of view is not natural to many of us. It is a skill, however, that we can learn.

Unfortunately, most books on marketing are an attempt to chronicle universal truths that apply to all businesses. They do not and can not necessarily address all the particulars of our specific situations. Each of us in a different set of circumstances. Thus we must each do our own homework to think through how this principle applies to one's unique place.

Rod Johnson, Director of Marketing & Business Development at Eventis Telecom, once observed that successful people do the things that are necessary, not just the things that are enjoyable. "It is interesting," said Johnson, "that by doing these necessary things routinely and developing skills in those areas, they become enjoyable or at least not unpleasant."

So it is with finding business and marketing solutions. We must invest time to think, to gather information, and do our homework.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

"If we would first know where we are, and whither we are tending," Abraham Lincoln once said, "we could better judge what to do and how to do it." This is a requirement in our business planning today as well.

Too often we simply blunder forward without a plan. Many people have found early success simply on the sheer force of their personalities. Eventually, without a plan they will come up against a wall or end up in a corner.

Lincoln observed that we need to have a clear understanding of where we are first, before we act. A lot of money is wasted in advertising because we do not take the time to figure out what is really happening. By this I mean, what is our situation? Who are our customers? What is their opinion, if any, of our products and services? Who are our competitors and how are we perceived in relation to these competitors?

In short, our business exists within a context which includes both the market and our overarching business strategy.

POSITIONING FOR SUCCESS

Positioning begins with establishing an identity. The concept is easily understood when you look at examples. McDonalds and Bellisio's have created two very different identities in the Duluth eatery market. Is one right and one wrong? Absolutely not. Each has targeted a different consumer niche. McDonalds is fast food with no surprises, the same burgers that you get in Ohio or Michigan or South Carolina. By way of contrast, from the wine racks to the menu selection Bellisio's speaks to a different class of consumer.

Positioning is more than branding. When you think of McDonalds you not only have golden arches in your head, but you have a product and experience as well. Getting the name Bellisio's into the market means nothing unless there is also an association made with the identity.

Al Ries and Jack Trout, authors of *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, talk about capturing the mind of one's prospects. One can hardly talk about this subject without tipping the hat to the two men who popularized this concept (and claim to have invented it, thereby positioning themselves as the ultimate authorities.) The book is an easy read, and widely recommended, with anecdotes and case histories that bring clarity to the key idea.

SUMMING UP

Advertising, like any investment, involves risk. There are no silver bullet universal truths that eliminate the need for strategic thinking. That is, even the best marketing concept requires that we think through how it applies to our specific situation, our specific market. This homework is foundational to our success.

Knowing who we are is not the end of the matter. Do our products or services have value in the market? Do they meet a need? Once we have determined who we are and what we have to offer, we must find the most effective means of communicating this message to those who need our goods and services.

I once attended a direct mail seminar in which the speaker stated that 95% of all mistakes occur before the pen hits the paper. Understanding who we are and who are customers are will help us craft promotional messages that are targeted to connect with the right hearers, achieving the results we seek. We can never eliminate risk entirely. But we can certainly improve our odds.

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