

The "Aha!" Factor: Positioning So Your Audience "gets it"

by Mike Gospe

A true story: A luminary and well-respected leader was invited to attend a critical board meeting of a Silicon Valley start-up. The executive team had feverishly worked to reinvent and reposition the company, and this meeting was their one chance to gain a critical endorsement. With introductions completed, the CEO and VP of Marketing began to relay the genesis of the start-up with eagerness and passion. Fifteen minutes later, the luminary politely raised his hand and asked them to stop. He said, "I still don't get what you do." The silence was palpable.

What went wrong? There was no "Aha!" moment as they described the business problem they address and the benefits of their solution. The good news is that disasters like this are avoidable. This article highlights the single most important exercise executive teams should conduct to craft messages that ensure that board members, analysts, partners, and sales prospects alike, "get it."

Forming the positioning statement

The lack of a clear message confuses prospects and other critical audiences, yet few executives dedicate the time and talent required to transform their ideas into crisp messages.

The solution is to dedicate executives' time and focus on building a consensus around a clear, specific positioning statement. This exercise may be the responsibility of the marketing VP, but it will require the entire organization to embrace it and communicate it.

The Positioning Statement is...	The Positioning Statement is not...
a description used for internal purposes to align all employees. It specifies: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the target audience,• the name of the product or service,• the category of the product or service,• the primary benefit(s) offered, and• the points of differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a tag line,• an advertising slogan,• a word-for-word message for customer viewing, nor• a business plan.

Although it appears at first to be a simple "fill in the blank" exercise, executive teams can wrestle with this exercise for days. Testing and evaluating it with prospects and business partners may take several weeks.

Do you have a positioning crisis?

Without a common framework and agreement on the words to use to communicate the value of the product and service, the members of the executive team will not be aligned. The result: mis-directed sales reps, ineffective marketing campaigns, and avoidable conflicts between marketing and engineering regarding the product road map. This table will help you assess your “crisis level.” If you agree with one or more of the items listed, it’s time to revisit your positioning statement.

Clues that your positioning statement should be revisited
• It takes the average sales rep more than 30 seconds to describe the product or service.
• Each sales rep has a different “elevator pitch.”
• Your company has changed markets, investors, price points, sales model, or partnering/channel strategies.
• It’s been a year since the executive team has reviewed the company’s positioning.
• It takes the marketing/PR team more than 3 drafts to finalize press release messages.
• The VP of Marketing and VP of Sales have conflicting perspectives on the positioning and sales tactics.

With these turbulent economic times and the rapid evolution of technology, smart companies review their positioning once or twice a year.

Where to start

The most productive positioning exercises or workshops include the participation of a board member or other outside industry leader. Although it is sometimes difficult to set aside time for this type of activity, the insights gained tend to greatly improve the go-to-market strategy.

The best place to begin is with a clear understanding of your competition. Many startup executives claim that their product or service has no competition. This is most likely untrue, in that prospects usually are using some other product or approach to solve the problem.

Testing messages

Aside from the involvement and partnership with marketing and sales teams in this exercise, the positioning and its resulting messages must be tested and nurtured with both prospects and customers.

Successful companies are vigilant in testing their messages to match the most relevant message to a specific target audience. Messages can be tested formally (via focus groups), informally (via “friendly” prospects and customers), or through a variety of well-targeted market outreach mechanisms. With careful planning, testing can be executed quickly and inexpensively.

Putting it all together

Bottom line: improved messaging will have a direct impact on the ROI of any marketing and sales program. For more than 10 years, members of the KickStart

team have conducted executive positioning workshops for both established and start-up businesses. We'd like to tell you more. aTo request additional information on these or other KickStart programs, please contact [Mike Gospe](#) at 650.464.7662 or mikeg@kickstartall.com.

Copyright 2004 KickStart Alliance www.kickstartall.com