

Personas, Positioning, & the Message Box

By Mike Gospe

When lead generation programs fail, they do so mainly because the messages communicated are irrelevant or ill-timed for the target audience. Our target customers are bombarded with thousands of messages every day. Unfortunately, we (as a society) have become so used to information overload it's become the white noise of the marketplace. As a result, the knee-jerk reaction from companies is the "ready, fire" execution of promotional offers. It's easy for marketers to fall into the trap of believing that volume replaces the need to "aim".

Here's the good news: it's easier than you think to get out of this cycle of noise-producing marketing that feeds the black hole of spam filters everywhere. All it takes a small bit of back-to-basics marketing discipline with three key exercises designed to help you understand the buyer. After all, in our competitive business climate, whoever understands the buyer the best, wins. Hands down.

The key to maximizing ROI of any marketing investment (big or small) is to truly understand buyers, what makes them tick, and the business problems they are trying to solve. The best, most effective lead generation programs always start with an investment in these three disciplined exercises:

- 1) Creating the Persona,
- 2) Tuning the Positioning Statement, and
- 3) Crafting the Story (with customer-friendly messaging)

Here's an example of each and how they build off of each other.

Part 1: The Persona

The **persona** is a fictional representation of a set of real people who share similar traits or experiences. A client I was working with was interested in reaching IT directors of the Global 3000 companies. That's a fairly wide range of folks. We needed more specific information in order to construct an



Example Persona: VP/Director IT	
General Information	
Age	mid-30s, usually male
Education	BSCE
Skills	While not as savvy as the CIO, he does play the role of a business manager; good at managing upwards
Experience	Usually promoted from a network manager at the company
Attitude	Understands technology, but that doesn't mean he wants to worry about the details. Wants to play with the latest technology from the leaders (Microsoft, Cisco, Google); early adopter
Reputation	A problem solver who can bridge technology and business issues
Work Information	
Job Objectives	Keep the network up and running (telecom, data, internet)
Work Challenges	Budget management: with budgets being cut, he still has to manage network performance especially in light of the continuous changes taking place due to locations, moves, acquisitions, etc. Needs to negotiate carrier agreements. He needs to translate "tech talk" into business language. He's overwhelmed and needs help.
Affinity	He may not be comfortable with outsourcing; however, he appreciates anything that reduces calls to him.
Net Peeves	Vendor hype; unproven technologies that waste his time
NOT Interested In	Managing and negotiating with multiple vendors
Expectations	Quick time to deployment; quick time to ROI; no headaches
Information sources:	Peers/colleagues; Analyst Reports (Gartner & IDC); user Google as a first-line of search resource, but trusts syndicated content websites like CFO Magazine, Finance Telecom, The VoiceFor.com, Network World when conducting vendor comparisons.
	
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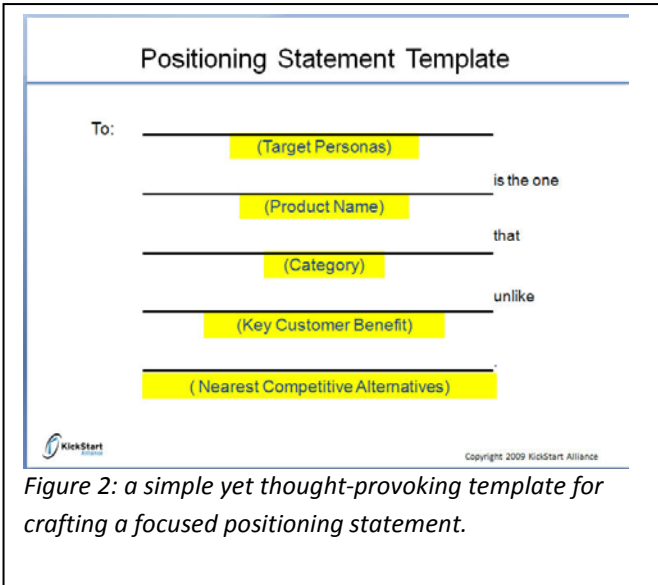
Figure 1: an example of a Persona.

effective integrated marketing plan. To help narrow the field, we built the persona illustrated in Figure 1. “Technology is cool” became the rallying cry of our poster child who came to represent the sweet spot within our target market segment.

Key to each persona is more than just basic demographics. We also want to include information about what they think and how they make purchase decisions. Include notes on their psychographics, work challenges, pain points, and search preferences. To get started, chat with a few sales reps to get their thoughts on how customers behave. You might also interview a few friendly customers to get some direct insights. Persona building is not a one-time static exercise. It’s intended to help you shape a hypothesis about a target market sweet spot. As you market to these folks, you’ll learn more about them and how they engage with you. Based on feedback and further insight, you’ll want to change and adapt the persona over time.

2. The Positioning Statement

With a keen sketch of our target persona in mind, we next rallied for a core [positioning statement](#) that would focus our attention on the benefits they find most valuable. We used a common positioning statement template illustrated here in Figure 2. It’s important to remember that the Positioning Statement is a tool intended for internal use only. It’s used to help focus our product strategy in order to address the key problem(s) the target personas are dealing with. The Positioning Statement is not the message to the prospect or customer; however, customer-friendly messaging can be derived from a carefully crafted Positioning Statement.



The diagram shows a "Positioning Statement Template" with a blue border. The text is as follows: "To: _____ (Target Personas) is the one _____ (Product Name) that _____ (Category) unlike _____ (Key Customer Benefit) _____ (Nearest Competitive Alternatives)". The placeholder text is in yellow boxes. At the bottom left is the "KickStart" logo and at the bottom right is "Copyright 2009 KickStart Alliance".

Figure 2: a simple yet thought-provoking template for crafting a focused positioning statement.

While I’m not at liberty to share with you their specific positioning statement created for the above persona, I can tell you the following:

- The few words describing the “persona” in their positioning statement were pulled directly from the persona illustrated in Figure 1.
- The “product name” is literally the product/service the customer ends up buying. This is not intended to be generic or intangible. It’s on the price list and has a product number or code associated with it.

- “Category” allows for a lot of creativity. With a nod towards industry trends and the shifting requirements of our target persona, we were able to create a new, logical category where the product is unique.
- Customers realize many “benefits” from the product. However, we focused on the one key benefit we felt was most imperative to our target personas and the problems they are trying to solve. While our messaging will unfold over time to address many benefits, we want our central benefit to be thematic and resonate continuously.
- The “nearest competitive alternative” is where we highlighted a few key points of differentiation.

3. The Message Box

Successful marketing today is less about direct selling and more about story telling. And people pay attention when the story is about them. The Message Box is the best technique I know to craft a concise “elevator pitch” using language the persona will understand. It’s a relatively simple technique but it takes a bit of practice to get it right.

In the center of the Message Box is the product being promoted. The “story” is comprised of four messages that build off one another, and they are numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4.



Figure 3: the “Message Box” template. Simply, the most effective exercise for drafting an “elevator pitch” that tells your story.

- Message 1 is known as the “engagement message”. A hook — usually expressed as a problem or opportunity – designed to literally engage the target audience in a dialog. This statement must be simple, yet relevant and clear.
- Message 2 is the “solution message”. This message suggests a criteria that must be met to address the problem or opportunity shown in the engagement message.
- Message 3 is called the “reinforcement message”. Now is when we introduce our product by name. Whereas the engagement and solution messages are about the buyer, reinforcement is about our product and how it is the best option for satisfying the conditions stated in the solution message.
- Message 4 is all about “value”. Literally, this message is designed to show how life for the customer will be better than before by using the product. It’s benefit focused.

When combined, these four key messages create an effective 30 second “elevator pitch.” With a solid persona and positioning statement in hand, the Message Box exercise takes about 45 minutes. Of course, this is just the beginning of a messaging strategy. Use the Message Box to create a solid foundation from which to build a full [content strategy](#) that will help you map the right messages (and the required content) to each stage of the prospect’s buying cycle.

Even Tiger Woods needs his practice

While many of us will recognize a good target market assessment, positioning statement, and messaging strategy when we see one, the basic truth is that it is hard to do. Challenge your marketing team to sharpen their pencils and apply these techniques. As you plan the next generation of your integrated marketing plans, take a few minutes to run through each of these exercises and critique your work. I guarantee that your efforts will be well rewarded with a better understanding of (and more empathy for) your target markets, crisper positioning statements, and more relevant messaging that will successfully cut through all the clutter.

About the Author

[Mike Gospe](#) leads KickStart Alliance's marketing operations practice where he conducts team-based "practical application working sessions" to improve the effectiveness of lead generation campaigns and product launches. His fun, practical approach and roll-up-his-sleeves attitude energizes teams, helping them to get "real work done" while guiding them to the next level of excellence. Mike is the author of the book, [Marketing Campaign Development](#), and his methodology is being used by San Francisco State University's College of Extended Learning course: "[Essentials of Integrated Marketing](#)."