

PR WEEK

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THINK PIECE

A well-crafted positioning statement can spell the difference between PR failure and success



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When Lewis Carroll's Alice asks the Cheshire Cat how to find her way, he replies, "If you don't care where you're going, it doesn't make any difference which path you take." It's the same with public relations programs. Without strategic focus, businesses become multi-headed creatures – speaking from many mouths, convincing no one, going nowhere.

Positioning is the heart of effective marketing. A well-crafted positioning statement defines company direction. It answers seven essential questions: Who are you? What business are you in? For whom? What's needed by the market you serve? Against whom do you compete? What's different about your business? What unique benefit does a customer derive from your products or services? Surprisingly few companies agree when it comes to answering these questions.

Don't confuse a positioning statement with your market position. Harry Beckwith's *Selling the Invisible* says, "A statement of position is a

cold-hearted, no-nonsense statement of how you're perceived in your prospects' mind. It is the core message you want to deliver in every medium." Don't get the two mixed up. Remember, no company can position itself as anything. It's all about market perceptions.

Finding the right path takes introspection, cooperation, consensus-building and an "outside-in" perspective, making a PR agency valuable. Find answers to the essential questions in your marketing plans. Enlist all key managers for buy-in. Those in communicating roles must participate.

Circulate copies of Trout and Reis' *Positioning—The Battle for Your Mind*; it frames thinking about this subject. Then e-mail an outline of the desired outcome consensus will bring. The most understandable benefits are time and money saved in tactical execution; the most valuable ones are consistently focused messaging helping achieve the desired position.

The hardest concept is narrowing a company's focus. Differentiation is essential. If management can't determine differences, look harder. Afterward, draft a positioning statement and key messages focusing on similar ideas. Craft a limited number of key (supporting) messages. Distribute these prior to the final session for review, then focus on constructive ideas, with agreement as your ultimate goal.

Apply the positioning statement to all communications. Tactics not reflecting key messages are off-strategy and should be disposed of. Granted, getting managers to dump sales material isn't easy, but communications managers must guide consistent use of the strategy. The payoff will be time and money saved and greater long-term communications success.

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