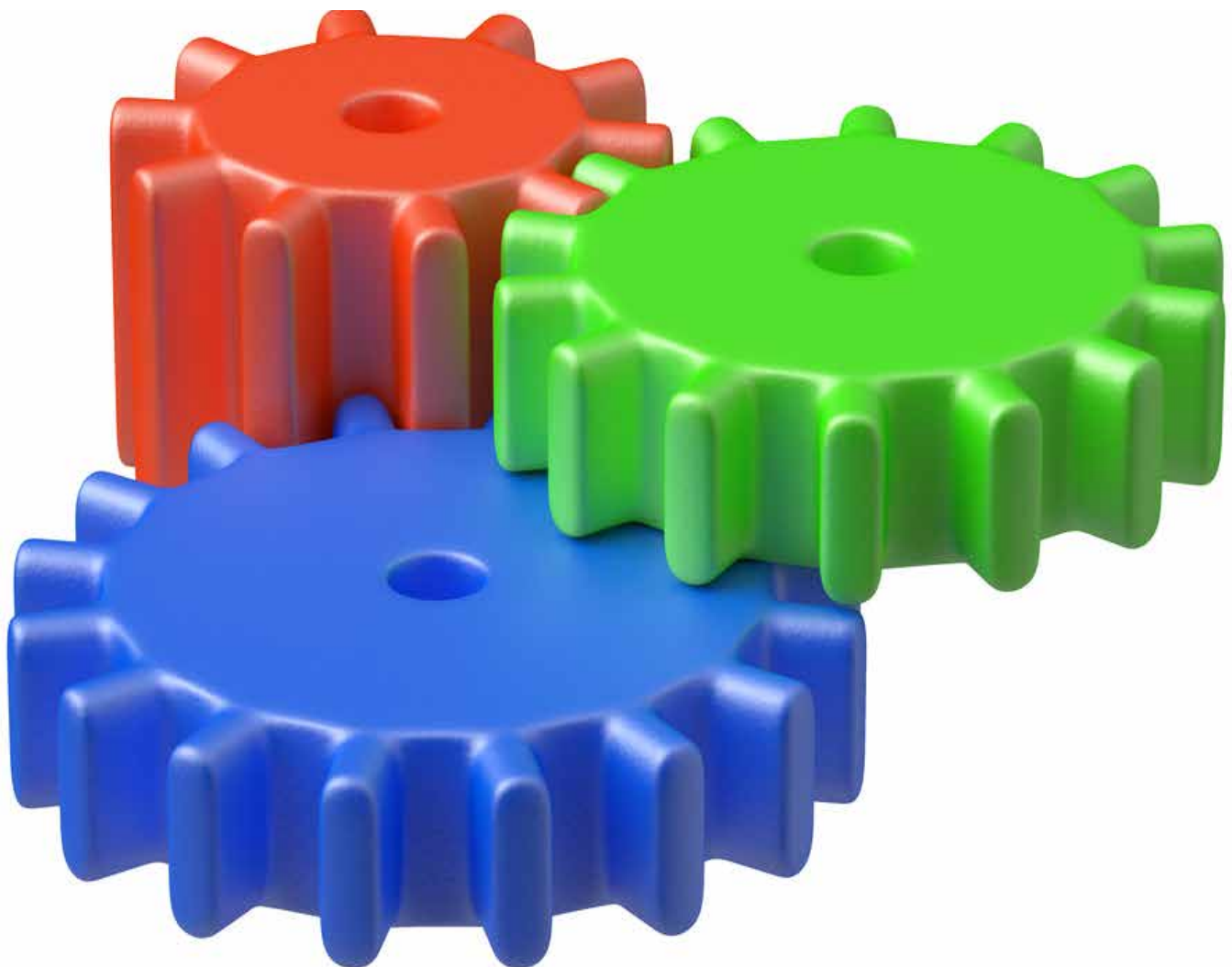**MARKETING HOW-TO GUIDE**

The Three Cs of Successful Positioning

Contents at a Glance

FORMULATE THE RIGHT MARKETING MESSAGE FOR YOUR B2B TECHNOLOGY PRODUCT

To effectively position your B2B software or product, you need to gain a thorough understanding of the three Cs: your channel, your customer, and your competition.

Conducting three Cs research is the first step in the business process for positioning.

This how-to guide explains how to research the three Cs, their importance, and their impact on the positioning process. Just as positioning is the foundation for successful marketing, understanding the three Cs is the foundation for a positioning strategy that will set you apart from your competitors.

Expect to spend several weeks researching the three Cs. The information you gather will help you determine the ideal position for your product. You can speed up the process by doing your channel research first.

The entire positioning process is summarized in the e-book Positioning: How to Talk so the Market Will Listen. This how-to guide focuses on the beginning of that process: three Cs research.

STEP ONE: JUMP-START YOUR POSITIONING WITH THE CHANNEL

Talk about business intelligence! Learn what's really happening in the channel, and you gain knowledge and understanding that guide decisions throughout the positioning process.

Your sales channel gives you the fastest access to critical information about your customer and your competition. It's the best place to start to gather the evidence that helps support your ultimate positioning strategy. Whether your channel is direct (sales staff) or indirect (VARs), it has the potential to provide you with a wealth of critical information, including:

- Customer problems
- Competitive intelligence
- Ideal customer profile
- The purchase process
- Why you win and lose

The channel helps you identify challenges in the sales cycle that may impact your message strategy. Channel intelligence also helps you zero in on competitive strengths and weaknesses. This knowledge helps ensure that you focus your message strategy on what you do well—and steer clear of what you don't.

Improve relations: involve your channel throughout the positioning process

When you help the channel understand your needs—whether you sell direct or through partners—you'll obtain customer contacts for interviews, great competitive intelligence, and what's needed to make it easier to win deals.

Ideally, your channel is involved in at least three stages of your positioning process: information gathering, consensus building, and execution.

Of course, maintaining good relations with your channel is critical. By making a few calls to some of your best sales people or your VARs, you'll quickly get a sense of how you might position your product. In fact, if you are

under a tight deadline, it may be the only information you have time to gather, but at least it comes from the source closest to the action.

Once you've developed a draft positioning strategy, you can then informally test it with the channel. See how they react to it. By continually seeking input and feedback during the formative stages of strategy development, you'll demonstrate to the sales professionals selling your product that their opinion matters—and you'll be cultivating an ongoing source of valuable market intelligence at the same time.

> The channel is your direct link to the battlefield where your product clashes with the competition, so pay close attention to the intelligence you receive from the front.

Dig deeper: learn what really takes place during the sales process

The channel is your direct link to the battlefield where your product clashes with the competition, so pay close attention to the intelligence you receive from the front. How do the prospects describe their most pressing problems during the sales cycle? What sales objections come up frequently? To whom do they compare you? (It may not be the competitor you had in mind.) This all impacts your positioning strategy, how you talk to your market, and the materials you create to support the sales process.

By actively engaging with your channel, you'll understand the sales process in detail as well as in context, enabling you to identify marketing communications requirements and opportunities at each stage of the sales cycle. This knowledge helps you match your marketing effort to how prospects actually buy your product. And you'll be able to select the marketing tools that best support and enhance the sales process: web seminars, white papers, blogs,

web product demos, brochures, product spec sheets, and ROI sales tools, to name a few.

Identify the problem: discover when your message is not working

You can exploit channel intelligence even when the sales process seems to be going sideways. Here's an actual example.

While helping a client position a B2B software application, our research indicated that about 50 percent of all deals went nowhere; these prospects decided to stick with their existing solutions that had been developed in-house with a generic tool. But we knew our client's application was better. What we uncovered was a misperception about the software that became a major factor in how the prospects viewed its position in the marketplace.

The prospects had considered a variety of products, including more expensive ones that offered more functionality than they needed. The implementations for these products were long, involved, and expensive. Unfortunately, they had been lumping our client's offering in with those solutions. As a result, we changed our positioning strategy to emphasize the benefits of implementing a packaged application that could be quickly deployed, one that was simple both to learn and use. The client's advertising, marketing, and sales tools all focused on shifting the perception, and it worked.

Get a clear picture: see who the ideal customer really is

I like to ask sales reps or VARs to describe their ideal prospect. The question I ask is simple: "What tells you this is a deal you can win?" In almost every case, I get answers that can be put to good use.

I started in the B2B software business with a company that developed accounting software for the Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) minicomputers. The company excelled at accommodating very complex financial and management reporting requirements.

I knew I had a good prospect when the decision maker said the organization had sophisticated financial reporting

requirements, and the ability to meet them was an important factor in the final decision.

When prospects asked me about my company, I'd provide a brief history about our heritage in public accounting, followed by the statement: "Most of our clients select us because they need extensive financial and management reporting. In fact, in many cases, we were the only company who could accommodate their large account structure and complex reporting requirements."

I wasn't just saying this to clinch a sale. It was the truth, and it influenced our marketing, sales, and product development. The profile was crucial in winning the right kind of deals, ones that resulted in strong customer loyalty.

Good sales professionals—whether they're yours or those of your VARs—will be able to quickly describe to you the ideal prospect, often in startlingly plain language. This ideal customer profile addresses both demographic and psychographic characteristics. In the next section, I'll discuss the customer much more extensively. The important point here is to start your research with the channel because it will lead you to actual customers—customers who can tell you what problems led them to buy your product. Working closely with your channel, you'll be able to identify a wide range of customers and prospects who will help you home in on the truth about your product, how it stacks up in the market place, and the real-world business benefits it delivers.

Uncover the truth: identify your real strengths and weaknesses

Good sales professionals will also be able to tell you why they win and lose, shedding light on the sales process, and how your positioning strategy can help it. They'll be able to tell you the truth about product strengths and weaknesses. With this knowledge, you may decide to make a particularly bold statement about the benefit of your product that your competitors can't match. By emphasizing your strength in your message strategy and marketing, you can engage your competition in a battle you know you can win.

It's important to note, however, that the size of your company and standing in the market has a significant impact on winning and losing, and therefore how you position your product. This is where reality sets in. Make claims that fit your standing in the market; in other words, claims that are believable, relative to your market status.

Summary

Your channel plays a vital role in helping you gather research about the other two Cs: the customer and the competition. The battleground where marketing and reality meet, the channel can help you discover the unvarnished truth about your product. It can offer you a competitive advantage if you are willing to face the truth, because many B2B software companies never come to grips with it. A thorough knowledge of your channel can also provide understanding that impacts positioning, and may ultimately identify the deciding factor in the direction you take with your positioning strategy. Equally important, nurturing your channel on an ongoing basis will provide timely information and feedback about the effectiveness of your positioning strategy, enabling you to refine and strengthen it. (How do you create a positioning strategy? Download the e-book Positioning: How to Talk so the Market Will Listen.)

Step One Points to Remember

1. Involve your channel throughout the positioning process to get battlefront intelligence and improve relations.

2. Dig deep to understand what's really going on in the sales process.

3. Get your channel to describe your ideal customer profile.

4. Develop relationships with your best sales people. Call them and you'll quickly get a sense for how you should position your product.

5. Park your assumptions. Be aware you'll likely discover market perceptions that don't align with your own. Let your channel be your sanity check.

6. Make it continual. Reach out to your channel regularly to garner the most up-to-date market intelligence. Today's markets change rapidly.

STEP TWO: KNOW THY CUSTOMERS—AND THEIR PROBLEMS

The previous step explored the pivotal role your channel can play in the positioning process, whether you sell direct or through partners and value-added-resellers. In the next step, we'll look at competition, including how to determine how your competitors are positioned, and how to use this valuable information.

Customers vary widely from case to case—so where to begin?

Once you have completed your three Cs research, you'll want to begin the brainstorming process of developing several good options for your positioning statement. But how do you get the brainstorming process moving in the right direction? There is a cut-to-the-chase question that will get you right to the heart of it: "What is my target audience's most pressing problem?" Answer that, and you've made a great start toward finding the right position—that unique space prospects and customers can envision filling with your product.

Keep the customer center stage: three essential questions to ask about your audience

Perhaps the most critical step in the positioning process, the discipline of identifying, documenting, and then ranking customer problems is the second of the three Cs of successful positioning.

Right now, let's keep the customer center stage to learn the value of being able to answer the following key questions about your target audience:

1. What important problem does your product or service solve?
2. How do prospects solve that problem today?
3. Why is your product a better solution to that problem?

> A list of product features not expressed in terms of benefits just won't cut it. Your passport through the filter is a benefit statement addressing the primary concern that keeps your prospect awake at 2 a.m.

Cut through the clutter: address your customer's primary concern

Your prospects are overwhelmed by communication in today's fast-paced, high-tech world. They receive so many marketing messages—somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 per day—that they have become experts in filtering them out. In order to reach them, you must penetrate their filter with a message that is relevant, important, and unmistakably yours.

A list of product features not expressed in terms of benefits just won't cut it. Your passport through the filter is a benefit statement addressing the primary concern that keeps your prospect awake at 2 a.m. Your target audience will listen only when you demonstrate that you understand their problem, and clearly communicate the benefit your product offers to solve it.

Solve a single, focused problem with your product: concentrate on the one problem your customers need resolved

That means you can't successfully position your product unless you know the answer to this basic question: "What is my target customer's *most* pressing problem?" And notice that this question asks about a single problem, not problems. Although it may be tempting to think of your product as a Swiss army knife, don't, because it's doomed to fail. Today's technology buyers rarely want a multidimensional solution that's only okay at a lot of things—what they want is a focused solution to their really important problem. So why dilute the impact of your message? Give them a break, and show them you truly understand what's keeping them awake at night. Your single-mindedness will be rewarded.

Recognize the impact of demographics and psychographics

We define products and customers in terms of markets and audiences. Markets are created by companies with similar characteristics, whereas audiences comprise

the individuals who participate in the purchase pro-cess—the people you need to reach with your market-ing communications.

Markets and audiences have both demographic (struc-tural) characteristics, such as group size, age, income, education, product usage patterns, and location, and psychographic (behavioral) characteristics, including perceived problems, competitive pressure, risk tolerance, frustration/pain levels, the need to impress others, market trends, and the ability to manage and respond to change.

A matrix like the one outlined in Figure 1 provides a way to include both demographic and psychographic informa-tion in a customer profile. In positioning, psychographic data, like key business problems, provide critical insight into what it will take to build awareness and demand. Without this knowledge, we struggle to develop effec-tive messages.

Figure 1. Customer Profiling

However, this doesn't mean we should downplay the im-portance of demographic information. It determines your target market—after all, you can't sell to everyone. Even the most dominant B2B software companies can tell you very succinctly their ideal customer profile. Many large, cross-industry software companies develop marketing materials to support vertical sales efforts. Even dominant accounting/ERP companies struggle to sell outside their sweet spot for company size and revenue.

Demographics can also tell you the best target for your message within your market. Typically, it will be the decision maker, the person who signs the check or key

influencers. That's why you need demographic intel-ligence, such as job titles, functions and responsibilities, hierarchies, and organizational relationships.

Unearth your customers' key problems: explore your company and channel for invaluable customer information

Here's how to gather the information you need to develop a comprehensive understanding of your customer. If you're lucky, your product marketing manager already has an intimate understanding of your target customer. After all, it's the product marketing manager's job to help evolve the product based on customer and competitive needs. However, many B2B software companies are un-derstaffed—often the same person handles both product marketing and product management, so there's little time to get out in the field and interact with customers. Not to mention the manager's mindset may be skewed toward product features and attributes rather than benefits.

Whether or not you already possess customer informa-tion, the place to start gathering and documenting this information is not with the customers themselves. Instead, involve key individuals in your company and your channel, whether it is your in-house sales department, partners, or VARs. Everyone in your company will have an opinion about customer problems, so while it is impor-tant to listen, it is equally vital to evaluate what you hear.

Compile an initial list of perceived customer problems, then find out if these problems align with reality: in simpler terms, ask your customers why they bought. As we pointed out in the previous step regarding the sales channel, this is your direct access to your customers, so you should work with your channel to identify customers willing to share their opinions and give you the honest feedback you need to truly understand what's keeping your customer awake at night.

Once you've developed a list of key problems that aligns customer input with feedback from within your company, you need to rank them. If you had asked people to rank problems when you surveyed them, this can go pretty quickly, but be alert for repetition (the same problem described in different words) and broad generalizations.

Build a positioning statement—then put it to the test

Now, you are ready to start developing a draft positioning statement and message strategy. The act of ranking customers' problems may have already revealed patterns and stimulated valuable insights for positioning your product. Instead of becoming paralyzed by countless possibilities for your positioning claim, you can see clearly your target audience's most pressing problem, and shoot straight for the bull's eye. At this point, you have a great starting point for brainstorming how to solve that problem and a good idea of what benefit claim to make—and you're on the way to finding the right message to express it.

Let's assume you've developed some good options for your positioning statement. The best way to test them is to ask the basic question: does your statement address the target audience's most pressing problem? If it doesn't, go back to the drawing board. If it does, however, this does not necessarily mean you've found the answer to marketing and sales success.

Your positioning statement still needs to pass other tests. Is it believable, usable, and unique? In this step, we've addressed in detail how to make an important claim by stating a benefit that addresses your target's most pressing problem. Your knowledge of the customer also lets you objectively assess whether your positioning statement answers the following questions:

- Is it relevant to the target audience?
- Does it build the confidence that you understand customer problems?
- Does it create a sense of urgency?

Believability is somewhat subjective, but if you can put yourself in your customers' shoes, you should be able to make an intelligent judgment. Uniqueness is much easier to judge, and will be covered in the final step.

Summary

Know your customer at least as well as you know your own products. As we've seen, it's essential to positioning your product effectively. When you understand your customer, you can cut through the clutter and deliver a message to your target audience that sticks. But that's only if you address that market's most pressing problem. Express your positioning claim in terms of benefit—how your product solves that problem—rather than product features, and your target audience will be more likely to listen to your message.

Does all this mean you've found the right position? Not if someone got there first. Take a close look at how your competition is positioned. How are they communicating with the market? The perfect position is one that passes the test of uniqueness—either you are the only company who can make your claim, or you are the only one currently making it. That's why the third C of the three Cs—the competition—also plays an important role in the positioning process.

Step Two Points to Remember

1. Effective positioning is dependent upon being able to answer this question: "What is my target audience's most pressing problem?"

2. Your target audience will listen when you demonstrate that you understand their problem.

3. Focus your positioning statement on one problem—the target's most important one.

4. Demographics are important because they help identify your target audience.

5. Get input internally about key customer problems. Then do a reality check by interviewing customers.

6. Even if your proposed positioning statement addresses the number-one problem, it may not be unique. If not unique, do more brainstorming.

7. Develop clear positioning and messaging for your audience. To penetrate their filter, show the customer you understand their most urgent need.

STEP THREE: CONSIDER YOUR COMPETITORS—THEY COMMUNICATE MORE THAN THEY REALIZE

Before accurately positioning your product, you first need to size up the competition. Then, find a way to most effectively set yourself apart.

Long before marketers discovered positioning, early baseball great Wee Willie Keeler (lifetime batting average .345) summed up how to score on the competition: "Hit 'em where they ain't." In positioning your B2B software or technology, you need to make a unique claim that distinguishes you from the competition. Of course, like a well-placed hit, this is even more effective if it makes the other guys look like they are playing out of position.

How do you do it? Intuitively, the answer is obvious: pay close attention to your competitors, analyze their marketing communications, and evaluate their notable characteristics. Many B2B software companies employ a competitive intelligence group, and they typically do a great job of assessing and comparing features, functions, and capabilities. It's hard, time-consuming work, and requires a stealth mentality. But these groups almost always focus on product issues, and that's not where your positioning battle is fought.

Test for uniqueness: avoid the "me-too" trap

Competitive analysis isn't complete until you evaluate competitors' advertisements and marketing materials to uncover intelligence about how they position themselves. This is actually simple work, takes little time, and provides strategic results. In this way, you can easily determine whether your proposed product positioning is unique, and avoid creating "me-too" marketing materials that fail to set you apart from the competition.

Testing your positioning statement for uniqueness is a critical step in the positioning process, but one that many B2B software marketers overlook. Don't let it happen to you. By passing the test for uniqueness, you'll have confidence that you've pinpointed the right position for

your product, assuming you've done all the research identified here—you need a thorough knowledge of your channel, customer, and competition. In the final step, you'll learn how to avoid the most deadly sin of all: using the same or similar position as your competitor without knowing it!

Give your prospective customer a break: differentiate!

It's been more than 40 years since Al Ries and Jack Trout said in their marketing classic *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind,* "Too many companies embark on marketing and advertising as if the competitor's position did not exist. They advertise their products in a vacuum and are disappointed when their messages fail to get through."

The problem has only gotten worse. In every B2B software market I monitor, there are at least two competitors with similar positioning strategies. Figure 2 illustrates how six vendors in the business intelligence (BI) market are making a similar claim—insight—and three all claim they deliver better, more informed decisions.

The goal in positioning is to facilitate your target market's association of a significant benefit with your product or company. By consistently communicating an idea that has meaning and importance to the target audience, you stake your claim to the position you desire.

But you can't claim a position in your market if you are making the same claim as one of your competitors. That's why you need to keep one eye on the competition while in search of that unique positioning strategy that provides a clear point of differentiation. By definition, differentiating your product will make it stand out, resulting in increased awareness and refueled consideration of your product.

Failure to differentiate creates market confusion, which inevitably leads to longer sales cycles, a familiar problem

for many B2B software and technology companies. You probably know the symptoms, and most likely blame the buyer for this issue. But what about "me-too" marketing? Differentiation is what B2B software technology companies covet the most. Yet few companies successfully achieve this, generally because they either don't know how to evaluate and determine competitors' product positioning or simply don't consider it sufficiently important.

> You can't claim a position in your market if you are making the same claim as one of your competitors.

Be clear in your approach: no position is based on cleverness alone

One common mistake is the belief that clever writing can make your position unique. This approach will miss the mark when there's no expression of a benefit, just a clever description of what the product does.

In fact, if you are not making a benefit claim, you don't have a position at all. Ideally, your benefit claim should directly address your prospect's most pressing problem. But, of course, even then, your positioning may not be unique if someone else has already claimed it.

Scout the competition: examine communications for comparative positioning

It's fairly easy to learn how competitors are positioning themselves, because they do it in public. Start reading

and analyzing email advertising, banner ads, marketing collateral, and websites with an eye to deducing the positioning behind them. You'll probably find that the majority of marketing communications generated by B2B technology companies aren't backed by a solid position. Often, they're just a brain dump of product features or vague platitudes like "create efficiencies" or "cut costs." They lack the heart and soul of smart position: a meaningful benefit statement, a reason the audience should care about their product.

A positioning statement frequently appears in the first or last paragraph (or both) of an advertisement, or in a prominent place on the home page of the website. A good one will contain a focused benefit idea or concept that addresses a real business challenge, and ideally, the target audience's number-one problem. For each competitor, analyze as many of their marketing communications as possible, including website, direct mail and email marketing pieces, brochures, and press announcements.

Once you have determined the claims of each competitor, organize them in a table. Some competitors are likely to have similar or even identical positioning statements. Other competitors may publish many claims, making it more difficult to determine how they are positioned, if at all. It is a common mistake for companies to make two or more benefit claims of equal importance, so check for those too. Figure 2 is a real-world example of how the following midmarket and enterprise business intelligence (BI) software companies are positioned:

Figure 2—How BI vendors are positioned

Create Star

Position	Tableau	Qlik	SAS	SAP	IBM	Ifo Builder	Alteryx	Panorama	Microsoft	Tibco	Oracle	Pentaho	croStrategy
See and understand your data	X												
Better, faster, more informed, innovative decisions			X							X			
Capitalize on opportunities and minimize risks					X								
Insight		X					X	X	X	X	X		
Easily translate data into value												X	
No position				X		X							X

Note: Insert or delete the rows and/or columns between the orange borders.

Use perceptual maps to see "where they ain't"

OK, you've analyzed your competitors and created an informative table. Now, how do you decide if there is an unclaimed gap you can call your own? Follow Wee Willie Keeler's example, and "hit 'em where they ain't."

A table won't show where this position might lie, but a map will—that is, a perceptual map displaying the competitive landscape. Figure 3 maps the positioning landscape for the BI software companies listed in the table.

The axis labels represent abstractions based on the positioning statements found in the vendors' website content:
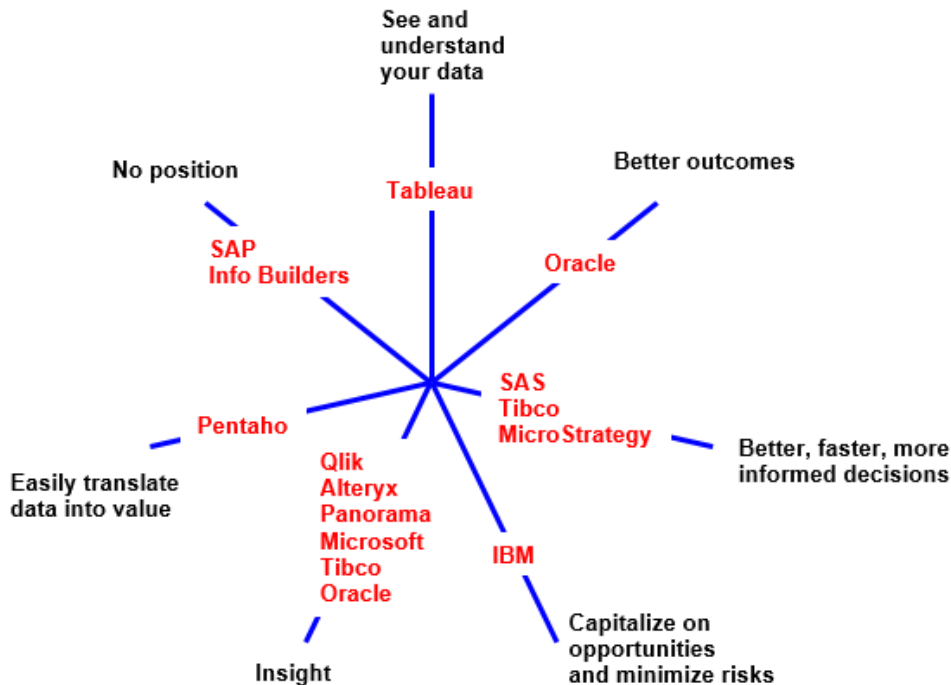

Figure 3—Perceptual mapping makes it easy to see how BI vendors are positioned

The axes indicate the ranges of benefits. There is no set way to designate them, and depending on what you find in your research, you may also have more than four axes.

You may also create multiple maps to examine different kinds of competitors, such as best-of-breed or vertical-specific vendors. Having multiple axes helps reveal where multiple benefit claims are being made by one or more competitors and potential areas of opportunity.

> Are you finished? Actually, you're never finished. You need to pay close attention to your competitors on a regular basis—especially to how they position themselves relative to one another.

Monitor the competition: a change may signal more than a new position

Are you finished? Actually, you're never finished. You need to pay close attention to your competitors on a regular basis—especially to how they position themselves relative to one another. If you detect a change, it signals the need to thoroughly reevaluate the competitor making the change. It could indicate a shift in management, a new company strategy, an adjustment in the target market, pressure from other competitors, or other factors.

Be on the lookout for new opportunities: the competitive landscape is always in flux

Throughout your research and mapping, keep a mental checklist of potential positioning opportunities for you. Is the competitor's communication clearly conveying the position? Or is it too complicated or muddled to

immediately grasp? Does it promise a solution for the prospects' most pressing problem? Is the message consistent? Or is it drifting off target? Is there continuity over time? What about across communications media?

Consistency can indicate that your competitor is disciplined, and leadership is confident of its vision and direction. Inconsistency, on the other hand, can mean your competitor is much more vulnerable. Most important, expect that, in the blink of an eye, your competitor may change its position.

Pull together your competitive analysis: utilize positive results from your research to strengthen your message strategy

Feedback from the channel can uncover important factors that may impact your message strategy such as an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of your product vis-à-vis your competitors. For example, if you always win deals when the prospect takes a close look at several products, often asking for a proof of concept, you may decide to craft your message strategy to suggest a bake-off. You may want to make a particularly bold benefit statement you know your competitor can't match, sucking your competition into a sales battle you are confident you can win. Can't you just picture Keeler faking a bunt, then punching a base hit over their head?

What if a competitor claims the same space?

What can you do if you and a competitor are making similar claims? Or if—after all the research, brainstorming, and soul searching—you conclude that you need to position your product similarly to a competitor's? It's happened to me in the past. My best advice: dig deeper into that same position. You may discover something your competitor missed. And tell a better story about your product, one that is focused, compelling, and speaks to the prospect in his or her terms.

Most of all, don't worry. You may find yourself the sole owner of that position, since few companies demonstrate the necessary discipline to stick with an idea long

enough to own it. It's not unusual to see a B2B software company abandon a position in less than a year in order to start a new campaign with a completely different position. Your patience and persistence can reward you with exclusive ownership of a position that is now even more valuable.

Summary

Let's be realistic. The size of your company and its standing in the market have a significant impact on winning and losing, and therefore on how you position your product or service. It only follows that you make claims that fit your standing in the market and ability to deliver. Dominant players have more latitude than small ones—a sad but true fact in many markets, especially B2B software.

On the other hand, remember that Wee Willie Keeler was only 5'4" tall.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lawson Abinanti is a positioning and message strategy development consultant who specializes in B2B software and technology markets. A former journalist, Lawson has extensive hands-on experience in many B2B software markets and co-founded Messages that Matter in 2001. Messages that Matter has developed a business process for positioning that is taught in a workshop setting, either on-site or via the web. Hundreds of marketers and product marketers have attended the positioning workshop and learned how to claim a position that matters to their market and is uniquely theirs. Lawson can be reached at 425-688-0104 or lawson@messagesthatmatter.com.

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