

## FEATURE ARTICLE

# Irreconcilable Differences: When Positioning and Branding Conflict

It's been over 20 years since thought leaders Jack Trout and Al Ries introduced positioning and branding in the landmark book, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*. Positioning reflects the perception of a company or product in the mind of the target audience compared with the company's competitors. Branding, on the other hand, is a name, symbol or design that identifies a product or service. While this distinction seems quite basic, there has been no shortage of companies that believe they have staked out a position effectively, established a brand and still managed to erode both.

## Positioning Comes First

Positioning always comes before branding. Its goal is to determine how the business views itself and how it wants to be viewed. Quick quiz: which car do you think of first when the subject is safety? The answer is generally Volvo, a brand that has been so well positioned that its name shows up at the top of the list in many safety surveys. Which computer company is the most trend-setting? Odds are you'll answer Apple instead of Microsoft. That's because Apple has secured its position as the innovator with such brands as the iPod and the iPhone. These two companies illustrate how a position is embedded in the public consciousness, taking into consideration the organization's vision, mission and values.

## Branding Basics

Branding follows positioning and should reflect the defined standards as well as corroborate them. Moreover, branding can be compared to a political talking point in that its repetition is designed to imprint identity. Talking points and brands cannot deviate from the position that created them. When they do, confusion is the outcome.

Branding and positioning values have to be effectively managed. That has not been the case when the emphasis on growth supersedes all else — that's when branding and positioning fall short. Trout expands on branding mistakes by describing four self-inflicted branding pitfalls that companies make. They are:

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## RECOMMENDED READING:

1. *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, Al Ries and Jack Trout
2. *Kellogg on Branding: The Marketing Faculty of The Kellogg School of Management*, Alice Tybout (Editor)
3. *Brand Failures: The Truth about the 100 Biggest Branding Mistakes of All Time*, Matt Haig
4. *Differentiate or Die: Survival in Our Era of Killer Competition*, Jack Trout and Steve Rivkin
5. *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing: Violate Them at Your Own Risk!*, Al Ries and Jack Trout

**1. Line extension:** “You position one way and add products that make no sense,” Trout said. He cited the introduction by Marlboro, the company that emphasizes the cowboy image with menthol and ultra-light-

*Positioning will always be the foundation and branding its reinforcement. Neither one should be taken for granted.*

cigarettes a few years ago. “That is total conflict with the position,” Trout says. “Real cowboys don’t smoke ultra-lights.” Even Volvo had to learn that lesson the hard way when it introduced a convertible line that the buying public rejected. “They’re all about safe cars,” Trout said. “They should stick with those and forget the sporty stuff.”

**2. Clouding the brand:** Remember the Cadillac Catera, a small-sized version of the luxury model? The company would probably just as soon forget it. “It competed with their brand because it looked more like a Chevy. It was a complete bust and cost them a fortune,” Trout said.

**3. Failing to stay focused:** Trout’s example is American International Group (AIG), which had been viewed as a leading insurance firm until it collapsed and received a federal bailout in 2008. Trout said AIG failed to unify position and brand, which led it into financial service products that conflicted with its purpose. “They had a good position, but didn’t stay focused and took the road to rack and ruin,” Trout said.

“They got too big and didn’t manage their position.”

**4. The Role of Wall Street:** Trout said publicly-traded firms are so busy trying to please investors that

they overlook the importance of their position and brands. His example: financially distressed General Motors, which he said attempted a broad-based strategy that pleased neither investors nor consumers.

“They have destroyed their brands over the years because each brand is everything for everybody and now they’re nothing.”

### Recognizing What Works

Whether a company operates in the business-to-business or business-to-consumer market, there can be no deviation from position and the brand associated with it, regardless of the necessity of growth. One company has a consistent message is the motel chain, Motel 6, which positions itself as reasonably priced and a warm and welcome location. “We’ll leave the light on for you,” its friendly ads say — just like home.

Keeping employees on board with position and brand is integral to consistency of brand and position. Accordingly, associates need to be motivated so that their interactions with customers are viewed as verifi-

cation (in human terms) of the company’s message.

In an uncertain economy, it is imperative for companies large and small to remember the foundation of positioning that is the backbone of their very existence. That’s one reason why it is helpful to conduct an internal analysis of positioning and branding in order to determine if one or both have been corrupted by counter-productive growth-based decisions. A team-building exercise on this very subject needs to look seriously at such issues as clear and easily understood delivery of messages, credibility in the marketplace and engendering customer loyalty. Positioning will always be the foundation and branding its reinforcement. Neither one should be taken for granted.

### QUARTERLY QUOTE:

#### I Wish I Had Said That

*“An organization can only ‘walk the talk’ when its managers deliberately shape its internal reality to align with its brand promise... (the brand’s) values must be internalized by the organization, shaping its instinctive attitudes, behaviours, priorities, etc.” -Alan Mitchell*

From the article “Out of the Shadows”, published in the *Journal of Marketing Management*, Issue 15, No.1-3, January-April 1999: 25-42.



## TPS MARKETING TIPS:

### Do's and Don'ts of Positioning and Branding

There are several basic rules that apply to all positioning and branding initiatives which can ensure the right approach and avoid potentially disastrous pitfalls. Consider them as guidelines:

#### Do:

- Establish position first by developing a unique ownership that competitors cannot match.
- Make certain that every brand is viewed as the embodiment of the position.
- Educate all stakeholders including employees about the company's position and verify buy-in.
- Hold continuous reviews on the effectiveness of both with customers and clients through ongoing testing.
- Ensure that every growth initiative is consistent with position and brand.

#### Don't:

- Make any decision that compromises a position.
- Introduce or modify any brand that clouds the company's position.
- Assume that the target audience will always accept the company's view of its position and brands.
- Assume that every stakeholder will stay on board.
- Be afraid of negative feedback.



## BUSINESS RESOURCES:

Here are a few websites to explore and find out a little more about branding and positioning.

1. **The Branding Strategy Insider Blog** is one component of The Blake Project, which helps organizations create brands that build and sustain trust. The blog helps marketing oriented leaders and professionals build strong brands. [www.brandingstrategyinsider.com](http://www.brandingstrategyinsider.com)
2. **The Small Business Marketing Guide** presents several DIY (do-it-yourself) brand marketing strategies to help companies grow their businesses. [www.smbmarketingguide.com](http://www.smbmarketingguide.com)
3. **Allaboutbranding.com** is dedicated to examining all issues relating to branding to assist companies in marking a corporate brand or a branding product or service. Read the article *Ten Most Common Shortcomings in Brand Implementation and How to Solve Them* by Matthew Healey at [www.allaboutbranding.com/index.lasso?article=345](http://www.allaboutbranding.com/index.lasso?article=345).
4. **Brand Champs** is a consulting firm that specializes in branding and re-branding. Fran and Bill Lytle are behaviorists, brand strategists, authors and speakers. For more information, call 732 356-7035 or visit [www.brandchamps.com](http://www.brandchamps.com).

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