

Requirements for positioning

Before you decide to position yourself, you need to ask yourself some fundamental questions:

What is our position now?

Marketing doesn't start with products and product development. Nor with manufacturing and distribution. Nor even with marketing planning. It starts with the minds of prospective customers. So you must begin by finding out what's going on there now. You can't do that by listening to people in your own company. You must get the answers straight from the source by commissioning professional market research. Where are we in relation to others? Are we there at all? To succeed in positioning, you must link your product to the ideas that already exist in customers' minds.

What position do we want to reach?

Where do we want to locate ourselves in our customers' minds? It's pointless to try and move into a position that's already occupied by someone else. It's equally pointless to set up a position so close to others that customers cannot tell you apart from the competitors. There's a limit to how many average-sized, average-engineered and average-priced Japanese cars people can remember. Above all, do not define your desired position too broadly. Do not try to be all things to all men. It's better to take up a narrow, focused position.

Whom do we have to beat?

Marketing is always a matter of surpassing competitors in one or more ways. The best bet is to try and find a position that nobody else has a firm grip on yet, for then you can occupy it sooner and with less effort. But you are more likely to have to outposition a product, a product category or even a whole technology to reach a sufficiently attractive position. So you must know whom you are competing against. You should spend as much time thinking over how competitors will react as you spend thinking about what you are going to do.

Do we have enough money?

It costs money to get inside people's minds and stay there. If you can't afford to invest enough to cut through the communicative noise and keep up a communicative pressure on customers, there's a serious risk that a stronger competitor will step in and take over your carefully prepared position. There are two ways (apart from realistic budgeting) to reduce this risk. (a) Go for a narrow, specialised position, rather than a broad generalised one, and (b) roll out your position gradually by starting with your most important geographical market and gradually widening the circle from country to country as you gain strength.

Can we keep it up?

Positions are not occupied overnight. It may take years before you start getting serious results – but when you do, it will be well worth the trouble and expense. Remember that positioning is a strategy. As a rule, a company should never have to alter its basic position. However, you'll often have to change your tactics for implementing it to take advantage of opportunities and overcome problems that arise, and to counter competitors' moves. You must constantly find new and better ways to communicate and dramatise your messages.

Can we live up to our position?

Will we have the resources for the necessary product development? Is the way ahead clear so we won't risk running into a technological blind alley? Can we educate our people so they will treat customers in a way that's consistent with our chosen position. Can we control marketing communications so that they will consistently convey the right impression? Ad agency people think positioning restricts their creative freedom. It does and it should. Creativity has no intrinsic value. It's simply a means to an end. Creativity is most effective when it's focused on a goal by clear positioning.