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Positioning Strategies for Obtaining and Sustaining Competitive Advantage

by
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Abstract. Brand positioning is essential for brand differentiation and building brand equity. Obtaining and sustaining competitive advantage through brand positioning is a complex process in the context of increasing competition and complicated consumers. However, many positioning strategies are prone to follow similar pitfalls by aligning to market tendencies and thus failing to provide significant brand differentiation. This paper analyzes new positioning strategies for gaining sustainable competitive advantage. By using anti-market reactions such as transformation, subtraction and division, companies are able to build effective positioning strategies by making the problem of competition irrelevant. We relate these new positioning strategies to the classic positioning process and identify the key elements which make them successful. We describe the value proposition of new positioning strategies from the means-end theory perspective. Finally, the managerial implications of new positioning strategies are reviewed. We suggest directions for effective positioning and propose avenues for future positioning research.

Key words: brand positioning, positioning strategies, brand differentiation, competitive advantage
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1 Introduction

Nowadays brand differentiation becomes increasingly challenging in the context of increased competition and sophisticated consumers. The ability to attract and maintain a solid customer base involves a deep understanding of consumer needs and consumption situations. In the process of satisfying their needs, consumers are confronted with an increasing number of options and with a limited amount of time for analyzing these choices. Moreover, their buying motivations are moderated by subtle psychological and personality factors.

For obtaining relevant brand differentiation and building strong brand equity, an efficacious positioning of the brand in consumers' mind is essential (Berthon et al. 2009). Brand positioning is "the act of designing the company's offer and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target customer's mind" (Keller, 2013). It is mainly the process through which a brand aims to be perceived as distinct and offering superior value in relation to competitors. The positioning process makes a product become significant for the consumer, through the creation of strong, favorable and unique brand associations (Keller, 2013).

The purpose of positioning is obtaining and maintaining a significant competitive advantage through brand differentiation. Competitive advantage is obtained by successfully managing existing consumer perceptions (Ries&Trout, 2000), in order to identify and capitalize on an untapped perceptual orientation in relation to a brand or product. However, sustaining the obtained competitive advantage is a difficult process, requiring marketing vision and a high degree of adaptability, in order for the brand to evolve in accordance to its initial positioning. It requires both simplicity and subtlety, in order to successfully build brand equity in time.

In the contest for choice, brands however encounter several pitfalls that may actually negate their differences and menace their lifecycle. Using a similar frame of reference and oriented towards negating competitive points-of-difference, brands converge towards similarity. Differentiation in the context of niches and perpetual augmentation offers only a short term competitive advantage.

Targeting consumer segments is problematic in highly competitive environments. Preexistent markets are divided in very small segments, with subtle and complex consumer profiles. A very narrow segment makes consumers "moving targets", with a short lifecycle and profitability (Blocker and Flint, 2007). Moreover, the identified target segment often doesn't correspond to the existent consumer reality.

Another paradox of mature product categories is that most competitors are oriented in the same direction, while opportunities can be found in opposition (Ries & Trout, 2000). For a positioning strategy to convey a unique brand personality, it should involve an unconventional, atypical, dissimilar positioning direction than those established by industry norms and by competitors. Such a positioning strategy involves the existence of a certain asymmetry towards competition, an imbalance to the norm and a resistance against the inherent tendency of conformity and competition imitation.

Moon (2010) describes several such positioning strategies, identified as strategies of reverse, breakaway and hostile positioning. These positioning strategies serve in creating unique and asymmetric brands, referred to as "idea brands" or "lopsided brands". These brands are inherently unbalanced, either through their structure (reverse positioning), their frame of reference (breakaway positioning) or their communication style (hostile positioning).

This article analyses the reverse, breakaway and hostile positioning strategies by reviewing literature references regarding the psychological principles they adopt and identifying the key elements which make them successful. We relate these new positioning strategies to the classic positioning process, explaining the rationale of the strategic reactions emerging in the four positioning steps: establishing the frame of reference, choosing the target segment, establishing points of parity (PoPs) and points of difference (PoDs) (Keller, 2013).

We argue how asymmetric brands manage to escape the problematic of mature markets, avoiding direct competition, obtaining meaningful differentiation and sustainable competitive advantage by use of anti-market reactions, like subtraction, transformation and division (Table 1). From a means-end-chain perspective, we explain how the features and personality of asymmetric brands offer consumers benefits and correspond to their personal values. Next, we analyze how these strategies may be complementary and synergetic in the creation of strong brands. We conclude about their communalities and the underlying managerial implications for successful brand positioning. Finally, the article suggests further research directions regarding asymmetric brands.

2 Reverse positioning

In mature markets, competitors often engage into repeated product augmentations, in order to negate competitive PoDs and transform them into PoPs. Paradoxically, the augmentation trend also leads to uniformity between brands, as they all tend to raise product attributes to industry standards. Instead of capitalizing on distinctive strengths and unique features, marketers are focused on raising underperforming attributes. However, product augmentation by addition or multiplication creates feature fatigue, causing excessive heterogeneity to be perceived as homogeneity by consumers (Berthon et al. 2009). In the end, by continuously augmenting their value proposition, firms encounter the pitfall of resource consumption, cost increase and reduced profit margins.

When industry actors enter the competitive treadmill of augmentation, competition eventually occurs on the basis of either increased value or low-cost: high-end actors compete on feature augmentation, while less augmented products compete on the basis of price (Moon, 2005). Competitors however will not benefit from increased customer satisfaction, as customer expectations increase as they are offered more (Carpenter, 2008). Therefore, significant and durable competitive differentiation becomes impossible.

Table 1. Differences to classic positioning

Positioning steps	**Classic positioning: alignment to market tendencies**	**Asymmetric positioning: "against the current" reaction**	**Asymmetric positioning strategy**
Frame of reference	Borders between product categories	Transformation	Breakaway positioning
PoP and PoD	Augmentation	Subtraction	Reverse positioning
PoP and PoD	Conventional attraction	Division	Hostile positioning

In this context, reverse positioning challenges the rationality of competitive and industry points of parity, which frequently become a given, a standard and an unquestioned requirement as the market becomes mature. By analyzing the underlying consumer motivations guiding the buying decision process, marketers may often discover that products over perform on an attribute or that the attribute is dispensable, as it offers little or no significant value to consumers anymore. This happens as benefits offered through a certain attribute have lost relevance, due to consumers gradually becoming over-satisfied and indifferent to it (Thompson et al. 2005). By identifying attributes on which a product over-performs or adds little customer value, marketers can diminish or completely eliminate the attribute.

The simplicity and purity of the buying experience which occurs by stripping down attributes in overcrowded categories are the main benefits on which reverse brands build their value proposition. This simplified offer allows consumers to focus on the main desired benefits in categories like services or electronics, where increasingly complicated packages lead to feature fatigue (Thompson et al. 2005). Here certain standard industry attributes may in time develop negative equity. The cluttered start-up page of search engines like Yahoo, Alta Vista or MSN, offering a bundle of services like news, games and weather, had become tiring and confusing. Meanwhile, Google offered the purity of a simple blank search page, combined with the power of the fastest searches. In the furniture industry some consumers have come to perceive excessive buying assistance as intrusive, while less or no assistance may be seen as empowering and adventurous (Moon, 2010).

For attributes which consumers normally desire, reverse positioned brands can make deprivation meaningful, actually transforming it into a psychological benefit. This meaning can be conferred in two ways: reshaping attribute perceptions or compensating the subtraction with a unique and desirable attribute combination. In certain contexts deprivation may be rationalized as positive. By analyzing underlying consumer motivations, an obvious disadvantage such as lack of durability for furniture might be rationalized as liberating from long-term house decorating decisions, leading to a less stressful buying experience.

On the other hand, by offering other unique features in exchange, an overall enhanced value proposition is created. In contrast to the lacking, the unexpected benefit is perceived as more valuable and desirable and offers the feeling of a positive trade-off, which is the source for customer value (Slater&Narver, 2000). Brand personality becomes more human and approachable, being contradictory, open and irreverent about its inconveniences, but nevertheless attractive and inviting through its uniqueness (Moon, 2010). With this perspective in mind, IKEA decided to remove well established industry attributes such as assembly, delivery and durability. It offers in exchange low prices, a seasonal product range and household accessories, together with a restaurant and children day care center.

Reverse positioning compensates attribute deprivation and the subtraction of established industry and competitive PoPs by offering innovative, unexpected attributes, which become PoDs. These carefully selected high-end attributes distinguish the brand from discount competitors (Moon, 2007). This unique combination of attributes makes any product classification difficult, as the product doesn't belong to either premium or discount offerings. Therefore, its position is very distinct and cannot be compared and ranked directly towards high or low end players. In this manner a reverse positioned brand succeeds to compete in both segments and can gain valuable market share from each. This double frame of reference, of both low-end and high-end consumers, allows reverse positioned brands to market several target segments, with diverse profiles.

Reverse positioning restructures the value proposition and creates a new customer value curve (Moon, 2010). Buyer value elements can be reconstructed by eliminating or reducing industry standard factors, while creating new factors and increasing the level for existing ones (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005a). This creates a unique value proposition, which allows both cost decrease by eliminating features and a high degree of differentiation by adding unique attributes. Unlike most positioning bases, reverse positioning capitalizes on both costs and customer value, which is one of the main premises for creating a “blue ocean” strategy. In order to be profitable, the new attribute value curve needs however to have a logical focus, a compelling positioning mantra, sufficient divergence from industry standards and to be customer oriented (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005b). Following these strategic guidelines, reverse positioned brands can gain a strong competitive advantage and establish new competitive frameworks.

From a means-end-chain perspective, reverse positioning capitalizes on the psychological values offered by simplicity or even deprivation combined with extravagance. In overcrowded categories, being the first to offer simplicity is highly differentiating (Trout, 2000). Extravagance and deprivation is a unique combination of “less but more”, which engages the consumer on both a cognitive and affective level. In this manner, reverse brands build customer value by conferring meaning and relevance to an unlikely combination of product attributes.

3 Breakaway positioning

Breakaway positioning is based on the principle of transformation, by crossing the boundaries of product categories. Breakaway brands are associated with another product category in which they do not hold actual membership, thus leveraging characteristics of that category. These foreign associations are an effective way of emphasizing a product’s PoD (Kotler and Keller, 2011), as long as users understand the actual product category membership, which confers the PoPs.

Stretching of category boundaries is achieved by discovering a new consumer perceptual orientation which isn’t yet associated with a product. This different perceptual orientation offers an alternative frame of reference and an alternative definition of categories. The affiliated product category serves to replace some of the associations that belong to the product’s actual category by appending its foreign associations.

These juxtaposed frames of reference both contain familiar elements, which make the understanding of the new product meaning easy, as consumers quickly grasp the corresponding behavioral routine of both categories. However, the result is completely novel, different and unique, as differentiation occurs by “adding new concepts to original concepts” (Moon, 2010). The symbiosis of familiar but previously unrelated elements creates a feeling of freshness and excitement.

A shift in meaning is created, by redefining entrenched category stereotypes related to quality, user and usage situations. The unlikely association of apparently unrelated elements, belonging to different product categories is meant to alter consumer entrenched perceptions, attitudes and consumption patterns. Thus, breakaway positioning has the ability to change consumer behavior, to shift perceptions about quality, to avoid negative perceptions related to the original product category, to rejuvenate a product’s lifecycle and to redefine competition.

The newly associated category can leverage its own “rules” about consumption patterns and perceived quality to the product. Swatch leveraged from the fashion industry the elements of "high consumption" and "high variety", creating seasonal watch collections offering a large variety of models. The definition of "quality" and value was critically shifted, as watches weren't regarded anymore as luxury accessories, but as fashion accessories, low and equally priced altogether, which suggested that value wasn't determined by former definitions of quality, but by subjective individual preferences and style.

Breakaway positioning is often useful in disguising the negative associations of a rightful category membership, by presenting it as something else. Consider how Kimberly-Clark transformed the product category of "diapers", associated with usage for 0-2 year olds. By presenting diapers as "pull-up pants" for older children, the association with the category of "children underpants" makes usage for older children suitable. Practically, what the product really is (a baby diaper) is cloaked under a new categorization (children underpants). This breakaway positioning rationalizes the use of diapers for older children but without the negative associations related to the "diapers" category. As a consequence, a new age segment is covered, prolonging a customer's lifecycle, which would have ended when toddlers grew up.

Another important implication of breakaway strategy is on the product lifecycle. Breakaway brands have the ability of repositioning a product in a mature market in the growth stage (Moon, 2005). A striking example is the category of "sitcoms", where actors inevitably age, thus making the sitcom lifecycle dependable to their age. However, if we consider a breakaway product, The Simpsons, which gave birth to the category of "cartoon sitcoms", its cartoon characters are ageless, making it the longest spanning TV show ever. The Simpsons successfully leveraged elements of both "children cartoons" and "adult sitcoms", creating the new breakaway category of "cartoon sitcoms".

Regarding competition, a breakaway brand has the ability of competing in both the category it has left and the one that it affiliated with, disrupting these categories and often creating an individual subcategory. What happens is that a "straddle" positioning is obtained, the breakaway product pertaining to both product categories and thus having two frames of reference. The PoDs in one category and frame of reference become PoPs in the other category (Kotler and Keller, 2011). This positioning allows covering a larger market, targeting customers affiliated to both frames of reference. Consider Swatch, which has redefined the category of "watches" by positioning them as "fashion accessories". Swatch attracted both watch enthusiasts, but also fashion enthusiasts, who didn't have a previous interest in watches. Using their entire marketing mix, breakaway brands offer a new perspective on their product and often alter the regular customer base associated to both categories.

A means-end-chain analysis reveals how breakaway positioning capitalizes on consumers' desire for novelty. Breakaway positioning brings a breath of fresh air in the mature categories of packaged goods, where purchasing often becomes mundane, routine and mindless. While line extensions and product augmentation may offer some diversity, in mature categories they become tiring and undistinguishable. Breakaway positioning however leverages consumers' desire for novelty and manages to offer highly distinguishable PoDs. Similar with reverse positioning, its value builds on the combination of unlikely product attributes, this time belonging to different product categories.

4 Hostile positioning

Hostile positioning makes use of the strongest anti-marketing reactions and perhaps the most counter-intuitive approach. While regular marketing capitalizes on the positives, hostile brands grow strong among negatives. However, this results into a complex attraction, a pull marketing strategy which thrives on consumers' curiosity and desire for self-expression, mystique, sincerity and engagement.

The barriers imposed by hostile brands may encompass the whole marketing mix, ranging from the product itself, to access and communications. Mini Cooper aggressively emphasizes the inconvenience of its very small size. The Japanese clothing brand BAPE distributes its products in difficult to find locations, limited editions and with specific buying restrictions. The United Colors of Bennetton communicate through offensive images on social or political sensitive subjects, evoking outrage and ambivalence. Car size, store inaccessibility, disregard for social norms, they all represent a "tax of ownership", a figurative price, which makes hostile products luxury brands of the non-monetary type (Moon, 2010).

Hostile brands are always antagonistic, opposing cultural trends, norms and consumers' expectations. Hollister blatantly rejects the access of youth who do not fit their beauty profile regarding weight. Birkenstock disregards esthetic standards and produces "ugly" bulky shoes. The barriers and antagonistic nature of hostile brands become their PoDs and statement of uniqueness.

The outcome is a strong division between consumers and non-consumers. Normally a bias related to brand reputation negatively affects consumers' trust and atitudes (Munteanu et al.2014). However, hostile brands play the "take it or leave it" attitude, completely disregarding entire groups of people, accepting them as non-consumers. They don't do much to support their enthusiasts either, as brand affiliation becomes a guarantee for strong supporters and advocates who proudly flaunt the brand in public. Hostility practically becomes a border line which once passed ensures consumer commitment (Moon, 2010).

From a value standpoint, hostile brands capitalize on their sincerity and bluntness. By applying the counter-psychology of positive branding, they become plausible and transparent. In striking opposition with most contemporary brands, enwrapped in sugary emotionality, idealistic artificial images and perfect products, hostile brands are honest and forthright about their shortcomings, which they even emphasize with pride.

They also give birth to mysticism, curiosity and debate through their access barriers and social norms trespassing. This curiosity emerging from cognitive and emotional dissonance has the role of raising awareness on the product with much less financial resources than normal promotional campaigns. Word-of-mouth, conversation and debate become essential in the fast raising popularity of hostile brands.

Finally, the essential role of hostile brands is offering the opportunity for self-expression. Consumers choose brands that are appropriate with their self-image and help them uniquely express their personal identity (Munteanu and Pagalea, 2014). While most brands make consumers hide under the same trends, a hostile brand is a instant image communicator, a personal statement of uniqueness and nonconformity.

On a personality scale assessment (Aaker, 1997), a hostile brand ranks high on the dimensions of sincerity, excitement (being daring and spirited), ruggedness (being tough and edgy) and sophistication (being meant for a special few). Brand personality can be regarded as a means of expressing consumer's personality and values (Woodside, 2004), as well as their desired lifestyle. Hostile brand values correspond to consumers' own self-image and to their need of being perceived as unique and proud of their individuality. Moreover, distribution scarcity preserves the uniqueness and specialty of the hostile brands, enhancing the distinctiveness and status of its owners (Hawkings, 2010).

Product usage creates a sense of community and solidarity between consumers, which is amplified by being in a minority, giving birth to minor streams and cult groups (Moon, 2010). Hostile brands thus respond to the need of social bonding, leveraging their values and stingy personality to consumers and acting as an identity builder. The hostile brand becomes increasingly human, eliciting reactions of support for the underdog, for the right to be different and unique despite social constrictions. As a result, consumers often become ardent supporters and defenders of the brand, manifesting active loyalty. Therefore hostile brands can successfully reach the highest levels of the customer based brand equity pyramid (Keller, 2013).

5 Asymmetric positioning strategies

Sometimes brands may combine elements from several asymmetric positioning strategies, creating a highly differentiated brand. Cirque du Soleil transforms the category of circus, by introducing elements from the categories of theatre, dance and opera, being thus a breakaway brand. However, it also uses reverse strategy elements, by removing entrenched elements from the circus category, such as animals and clowns. IKEA, while previously being presented as a reverse brand, adopts obvious elements of hostility through its refusal to offer assembly and delivery services.

Apple successfully combines all elements of reversal, breakaway and hostile strategic reactions. It refuses to offer standard product attributes such as a two button mouse and a removable iPhone battery, but offers ultimate technological innovativeness. It is a breakaway brand, creating hybrid products like the iPhone, which is a cell phone, iPod and browser device all in one. Finally, it is evidently hostile, through its high prices, non-responsiveness to consumer demands and product incompatibilities.

By analyzing reversal, breakaway and hostile positioning strategies, we can identify several commonalities. All asymmetric brands rely on an under the surface analysis of consumer motivations, revealing perceptual orientations and consumption triggers which have been unnoticed or disregarded by mainstream competitors. They thoroughly value flexibility and lateral, out-of-the box thinking, trespassing entrenched negations, limitations, categories, labels and norms.

Consumers' judgments about an asymmetric brand will likely involve uniqueness, novelty, credibility and superiority, while eliciting feelings of excitement, attraction and attachment. Highly noticeable in an ocean of industry offers which advance towards the same standard, lopsided brands attract loyal customers, which will strongly support the brand.

Asymmetric brands often manage to create "blue oceans", escaping direct competition and creating subcategories. As they are first in their created category, they benefit from first comer differentiation advantages (Trout, 2000). They are challenging and engaging through the mere quality that they offer novel ways for consumption and self-expression.

6 Conclusions

We reviewed and analyzed the manner in which lopsided brands react against industry and competitive standards. Reverse brands subtract standard attributes in counter reaction to augmentation trends. The breakaway positioning strategy transforms categories by trespassing category boundaries and challenging product definitions. Hostile brands manifest against the superficiality and dishonesty of conventional marketing, choosing to divide the public through unconventional attraction.

Asymmetric brands all have a rich personality, which is born through dissonance and inconsistencies towards competitive and industry norms. However, they all have a clear focus and offer consumers meaning and reasons to buy by thoughtfully addressing their personal and social needs. Reverse brands capitalize on simplicity, on deprivation combined with extravagance. Breakaway positioning satisfies consumers' desire for novelty and leverages the benefits of symbiotic elements. Hostile brands succeed by offering sincerity, bluntness and opportunities for self-expression, while creating curiosity and word-of-mouth.

In order to adopt the "blue ocean thinking" and implement an asymmetric positioning strategy, managers must shift their strategic focus from competitors to alternatives and from customers to non-customers of the industry (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005b). For this, it is also essential to regard competition not from an industry, but from a marketing standpoint. Competition viewed as an industry is "a group of firms offering a product or class of products which are close substitutes for one another" (Kotler and Keller, 2011). However, on a marketing level, competition occurs for satisfying the same customer need. This need isn't confined by the arbitrary rules established by industry norms and can be satisfied in various ways. Direct competition within industry boundaries limits the dimensions on which managers perceive their offer. Alternatives however broaden the context in which a brand performs, ranging from substitutes to alternative industries, complementary products and usage situations.

Another important managerial implication regards having a focused strategy. Asymmetric strategies should confer meaning and value to consumers in a feasible manner, which will deliver a sustainable cost structure and profitability to the firm. The asymmetric brand positioning strategy must be coherent and have a clear vision. Contradictions occur regarding category norms, but the sum of competitive factors chosen shouldn't raise strategic inconsistencies. Moreover, the divergence created through reactions of subtraction, transformation and division must be noticeable to surpass consumer perceptive levels. Achieving divergence requires sacrifices in terms of attributes and target segments, as asymmetric brands understand they should not be everything for everyone.

Finally, strategic positioning is a timely process which should focus on laddering the means-end-chain and deepening brand associations. Quantitative research can create insight into the personalities of reverse, breakaway and hostile brands, helping to a better understanding of their success factors. Further research should focus on analyzing the value chain creation for asymmetric brands. Also, brand personality has a significant importance in the nature and development of brand-consumer relationships (Aaker, 2004). Studying the influence of brand personality dimensions on consumer behavior and loyalty is should be a primary research venue. Therefore, we suggest that asymmetric brands will be analyzed on each dimension of brand personality.

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