

BEST OF: POSITIONING FOR CONSULTANTS

*10 of the best emails from my daily mailing list
on the topic of positioning for consultants*

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EMAIL 1

The Crux Of Positioning

Let's assume you believe that positioning is a useful thing to do.

This raises the question, what exactly is positioning?

Here's how I think of it:

Positioning is a strategic-level marketing construct that consists mainly of two things:

1. Who you want to help (i.e., your niche aka target market aka ideal buyer)
2. Your promise to them (i.e., how will they be better after your assistance, aka the expensive problem you solve aka their desired outcome aka your guarantee)

There are other components to positioning that are useful, but if you can figure out these two things, you'll be in good shape.

Yours,

—J

EMAIL 2

Positioning vs Specialization

Two terms that come up a lot when I'm advising people on how to increase their profits are *positioning* and *specialization*.

They're often conflated, so let's clarify:

Positioning is a strategic marketing approach intended to make your business, product, or service more memorable to your ideal buyers.

Specialization is the process of narrowing your focus to a particular subject or skill.

Broadly speaking, your specialty is *what you do* and your positioning is *how you talk about* what you do.

So...

You could be a specialist in the same subject or skill for the rest of your professional life, but change how you position it dozens of times.

Yours,

—J

EMAIL 3

Soggy Test Redux

It seems I did more harm than good with yesterday's email about reversing positioning statements to see if they are soggy. Oops! Sorry about that :-/

Y'all sent lots of perfectly reasonable questions about yesterday's test that I could try to answer but... rather than attempt to explain it, I'm going to give you a much clearer soggy test, which is this:

If people who are exposed to your positioning statement immediately have a **Rolodex Moment**, then it's not soggy.

For example...

If someone I just met at a party asked, “So... what do you do?” and I replied:

“I’m a pricing consultant.”

... I’d be extremely surprised if the next words out of their mouth were something like:

“No way! I know someone who needs a pricing consultant!”

If instead I said:

“I help self-employed software developers increase their income.”

... then the odds are a LOT higher that my new friend is going to say something like:

“No way! My brother-in-law is a freelance Rails dev. I should introduce you two!”

Of course, not every single person is going to have a Rolodex Moment, but if you bounce your positioning off a bunch of people and your batting average is low, you should probably think about going back to the drawing board.

Yours,

—J

EMAIL 4

Some Non-Soggy Positioning Examples

After yesterday’s message about soggy positioning statements, several folks wrote in to ask for positioning statements that I think are pretty good.

Here are several:

- I'm a software automation consultant who helps regional restaurant chains decrease the operational costs of their take-out services.
- I'm a web performance consultant who helps Fortune 50 retailers double their web page views.
- We are a design agency that helps human rights advocacy groups increase their online donations.
- I'm an application consultant who helps bank REO department managers eliminate two days' worth of administrative busywork every month.
- I'm a digital designer who helps print design agencies attract younger customers to their clients' brands.
- I'm a process automation consultant who helps orthodontists increase their per-patient profit numbers.
- 'PHP For Profit' helps tech support employees move to a more profitable career path.
- I'm an expansion consultant who helps franchisors attract new franchisees.
- I'm a design consultant who helps SaaS companies increase CLV prior to going public.
- I'm a data scientist who helps wastewater treatment executives decrease the amount of untreated waste being dumped into oceans.

Notice how specific all of these are compared to meaningless nonsense like "We create elegant solutions to complex problems" or whatever.

When you read these examples, your brain almost can't help running through the list of people you know, looking for a match on the target market.

For example: "Huh... do I know any..."

- "...chain restaurant execs?"
- "...human rights advocacy group presidents?"
- "...bank REO department managers?"
- "...SaaS company founders?"
- "...tech support employees?"

- “...orthodontists?”
- etc etc etc

I call this mental matchmaking event a [Rolodex Moment](#).

When they start happening to you, it’s an indication that your positioning statement is refined enough to start bearing fruit in the form of increased word-of-mouth, referrals, inbound leads, etc.

I know this seems counterintuitive, but narrowing your focus actually increases your leads.

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 5

Is your positioning specific enough?

Hanna and Travis over at [Louder Than Ten](#) invited to me do an AMA for their members today about pricing creative projects.

As part of the talk, we did a quick positioning exercise. Hanna asked everyone to go into the chat and answer the question “So... What do you do?” and then I went through and made suggestions.

Here’s an example:

We build e-commerce sites for sustainable black-owned businesses

I'm pretty sure I'm remembering this 100% correctly, *because it is memorable!* This is the core reason for positioning - i.e., to make your product, service, or business more memorable. I could remember this one, so I give it high marks for stickiness.

There's a second dimension I use to judge a positioning statement, which is whether it triggers a **Rolodex Moment** in my mind.

Again, this example gets high marks from me because the target market (i.e., sustainable black-owned businesses) was specific enough to make me think of people I know who might need an e-commerce site.

Another positioning statement came in that was a great example of not being specific enough:

We help businesses grow

Even though this one is short, I'm not sure I'm remembering it exactly right. I think the word was "growing" but I can't remember exactly how it was worded (maybe it was "We help businesses start growing?").

Anyway, this one doesn't trigger a Rolodex Moment for me because there's not enough information. What kind of businesses? Coin-op laundromats? eSports leagues? Robotics startups? Gambling casinos?

And what kind of growth? Revenue? Profits? Headcount? Marketshare?

Here's the thing...

If people in your network can't remember what you do and/or don't understand who you help with what, you are making it impossible for them to introduce you to people they know who might need your help.

Give them the tools to help you connect with more clients and they almost certainly will.

Yours,

—J

EMAIL 6

3 Questions To Help Focus Your Positioning

If you're not attracting as many leads as you'd like, you might have a **soggy positioning** problem.

Here are three questions that you can use to focus your positioning:

1. WHO do you want to spend your time with?
2. WHAT do you want to spend your time doing?
3. WHERE is the overlap between these two answers?

One way to work through this exercise might look like this:

Grab two different colored sticky note pads, let's say yellow and blue, for the sake of example.

Jot down answers to the WHO question on the yellow stickies, one answer per sticky.

Jot down answers to the WHAT question on the blue stickies, one answer per sticky.

When you're done with those, make different combinations of yellow and blue sticky notes to come up with a list of possible answers to the WHERE question.

What you're looking for is a combination of WHO and WHAT that is likely to be valued highly by the chosen audience.

If you have time, hit reply and let me know what you come up with.

Have fun!

Yours,

—J

EMAIL 7

So... what exactly is a Laser-Focused Positioning Statement, anyway?

A new reader to the list wrote in to ask where they could find out more about this “laser-focused positioning statement” thing I’m always banging on about.

Here’s my official definition:

Laser-Focused Positioning Statement—*A two-sentence message that tells people what your business is, how they will benefit from it, and how it is different than others. It is typically not used verbatim in marketing materials, but rather as a guide for crafting various types of messaging (e.g., tagline, slogan, cocktail party answer, etc).*

Got a minute? You can create your own LFPS right now...

Grab a pencil and paper and write this down:

I’m a BLANK who helps BLANK with BLANK. Unlike my competitors, BLANK.

Now, fill in the blanks to create your laser focused positioning statement.

Did you try it? Seriously... take out a piece of paper and fill in the blanks.

Seriously.

Paper.

Do it.

If you're having trouble, don't feel bad – almost everyone does. It's brutal. I've had people actually start crying during this exercise.

If you didn't have trouble with this exercise, you probably wrote something soggy like:

“I'm a UX professional who helps businesses with elegant solutions to complex problems. Unlike my competitors, I have 10+ years of experience adding value by building high-quality software.”

This is not a laser-focused positioning statement; it's just clever wordsmithing that encompasses your vision of yourself, to yourself; it doesn't communicate any value to anyone.

Here are a few good examples to get you started:

- I'm a Rails developer who helps dentists with older patients who forget appointments. Unlike my competitors, I use SMS reminders, which work on both smartphones and dumb phones.
- I'm a Web designer who helps Fortune 500 retailers with abandoned shopping carts on their e-commerce sites. Unlike my competitors, I use A/B tests to focus on the bottom line instead of wasting time with arbitrary design changes.
- I'm a spider wrangler who helps horror movie producers with actors who are severely arachnophobic. Unlike my competitors, I once convinced Gwyneth Paltrow to attend a red carpet event with a live tarantula on her head.

See the pattern?

I'm a **DISCIPLINE** who helps **TARGET MARKET** with **EXPENSIVE PROBLEM**.
Unlike my competitors, **UNIQUE DIFFERENCE**.

Nailing your laser-focused positioning statement is the single best thing you can do to grow your business. It's the foundation of everything.

Without a laser-focused positioning statement, you're wasting your time with marketing efforts like advertising, outreach, blogging, vlogging, podcasting, social media, webinars, etc.

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 8

“Can I position myself by target skill instead of target market?”

Reader Kristoph Matthews wrote in with the following question (*shared with permission, lightly edited for clarity*):

Hi Jonathan,

I've really been enjoying your emails. I have a question about positioning. I noticed in your examples that you tend to have a positioning that is geared to a certain audience/target market. I've been a generalist engineer in the sense that I've programmed things from fashion to data science and my audiences have been all across the board. However, I tend to gravitate toward certain technologies/types of products (e.g. real time apps, complex APIs).

So my question is: Can I position myself by “target skill” rather than “target market”, and if so, how does this affect my outreach strategy?

Thanks in advance!

Kristoph

Great question! Thanks, K :-)

If you're like most generalist software developers (and designers, and photographers, and illustrators, and copywriters, etc), you have spent your career honing your skills and mastering your craft, but precious little time understanding the value that your work creates for your clients.

i.e., You're more self-absorbed than empathetic.

So, when you decide to make the switch from generalist to specialist, it's much easier to envision niching down on your favorite skill than to niche down on your most valuable outcome.

In other words.... You know what your favorite skill is, and you have no idea what outcomes your clients value (never mind which is the most valuable), so specializing on a skill is the only clear path.

You can certainly specialize in a skill (e.g., MySQL performance optimization) and position yourself as the go-to guy or gal for MySQL performance problems. I call this a "horizontal specialization".

A horizontal specialization will allow you to command higher rates once clients reach out to you, but it does very little to attract clients.

It forces your potential buyers to magically recognize that your specialized skill is the solution to their expensive problems. Unless your buyers are your peers, it is highly unlikely that they will connect the dots.

Whatever your marketing tactics are (e.g., outreach, writing, speaking, PPC, etc), a horizontal specialization isn't going to help much.

Takeaway: A horizontal specialization will probably increase your profits, but probably won't help you get more clients.

Yours,

—J

EMAIL 9

Debunking The Top Three Fears Of Specialization

In yesterday's message, I suggested that you market yourself as a specialist in order to increase the likelihood of prospects hiring you.

But what exactly do I mean by the word specialist?

Here's the definition that I use in my coaching program:

Someone who markets themselves as having a sharply focused area of expertise. The area of expertise is typically defined by the overlap of the specialist's Discipline and the needs of the specialist's Target Market. See also: Vertical Specialization, Horizontal Specialization, Platform Specialization, Demographic Specialization.

Please note that **specialization is a marketing tactic**. Moving from a generalist position to a specialist position is a change in how you *talk about* what you do, not a change in what you *actually do* in your day-to-day work.

The Fear™

I know from speaking with hundreds of people that the idea of specializing (aka “pigeonholing yourself” or “niching down”) scares the daylights out of most folks.

Positioning guru Philip Morgan calls this reaction “The Positioning Fear Reflex” or simply “The Fear”. The Fear can manifest itself in many ways, but here are the three I see most commonly:

- I won't be able to find enough clients
- I'll get bored doing the same thing all the time
- I might pick the wrong thing

I'll debunk each in turn:

1. I won't be able to find enough clients

Yes, you almost certainly will be able to find enough clients. Almost nobody over-specializes on their first try. To allay your fears, simply do some research.

Pick a random niche like orthodontists, or Vice Presidents at Fortune 500 companies, or startups hosting their SaaS application on Heroku. I'll bet that you'll find at least 100 of each (which would probably be ten times more clients than you could handle in a year).

PRO TIP: If there's at least one successful conference for your ideal buyers, then there's a good chance that there's plenty of work to keep you busy for a long time.

2. I'll get bored doing the same thing all the time

This is your mind messing with you. It doesn't even pass the sniff test. "Generalist vs specialist" is not "big vs small", it's "wide vs deep". The surface area is the same, just a different angle of approach.

Consider this: virtually everyone who's ever given a TED talk is a specialist. World leaders, Nobel prize winners, cutting-edge scientists, world-famous entertainers, and so on. Do they seem bored?

3. I might pick the wrong thing

This is the least irrational of the three fears because it is technically possible. However, you can validate your niche before committing to it.

Also, you can (and probably should) refocus or shift gears every 18-24 months anyway.

Also also, if it turns out you genuinely did pick the wrong niche, you can pick a new one.

BOTTOM LINE: Picking the wrong niche is better than not picking one at all.

Yours,

—J

EMAIL 10

Who do you help?

Lots of folks have been emailing to tell me that the positioning crash course webinar I gave the other day was super useful.

If you don't have clear and concise answers to the following questions, you might want to check it out:

- What do you do?
- Who do you help?
- What results do you deliver?
- Why are you the best person for the job?

Here's a link to the replay:

[WATCH NOW »](#)

I went through a positioning exercise with a dozen people before we ran out of time, and one thing became crystal clear pretty quickly:

The most helpful question to answer is who you help. IOW - your audience or your target market or your ideal buyer.

I know most people hate picking a target market, but it unlocks all sorts of levers that you can pull to increase your impact, raise your prices, and grow your business.

If you don't know who you're trying to attract, it should come as no surprise that you're not attracting them.

Yours,

—J

★ BONUS: HONORABLE MENTIONS ★

BONUS 1

Minimum Viable Positioning

Let's assume you believe that positioning is a useful thing to do, but you're having a hard time doing it.

Start by answering these two questions:

1. Who do you want to help? (i.e., your niche aka target market aka ideal buyer)
2. What is your promise to them? (i.e., how will they be better after your assistance, aka the expensive problem you solve aka their desired outcome aka your guarantee)

There are other components to positioning that are useful, but if you can figure out these two things, you'll be in good shape.

Yours,
—J

BONUS 2

The Relationship Between Positioning And Specialization

Two terms that come up a lot when I'm advising people on how to increase their fees are *positioning* and *specialization*.

They are often confused, so I'd like to try to clarify:

Specialization is the process of concentrating on and becoming an expert in a particular subject or skill.

Positioning is a marketing tactic meant to make you more memorable to your ideal buyers.

Broadly speaking, your specialty is *what you do*, and your positioning is *how you talk about* what you do to strangers.

So...

You could be a specialist in the same subject or skill (i.e., the thing that you think of when you think of what you do) for the rest of your professional life.

During that time, your positioning (i.e., how you present your expertise in the marketplace) could change a dozen or more times.

Think of it like this:

If your specialty is running an Irish pub, your positioning is the sign outside on the sidewalk.

A sandwich board that says “Guinness On Tap” might pull people in during the cold months. In the summer, a sign like “Ice Cold Stella” might be more effective. *But changing the sign doesn’t change the way you operate the pub.*

Positioning gets people in the door. Once they’re inside, they’ll experience your specialization.

Note that although specialization and positioning aren’t the same thing, they are related and do inform each other. In other words, you can’t just put ANY sign outside the pub.

For example, it wouldn’t make sense to put a sign outside the pub that said “Prescription lenses in 60 minutes or less!” or “Get your bike ready for spring!” because those have nothing to do with your specialty (i.e., running a cozy pub).

Hopefully, this has been helpful. As always, please hit reply if you have questions :-)

(For the record, the pub sign metaphor is not perfect, but I think it’s useful for the educational purpose of making the distinction between specialization and positioning.)

Yours,

—J

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