# Toward a General Typology of Brand Positioning

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**Abstract:** The paper presents the concept of a general typology of brand positioning. The typology is best described by its underlying two-dimensional matrix where the two key dimensions are "Ante factum – Post factum positioning" and "Consumer-oriented – Competition-oriented positioning". The two dimensions of the matrix are discussed. Then the content of each cell of the positioning matrix is presented and signified via keywords. At the end the possible applications of the matrix are considered.

**Key words:** positioning, typology of positioning, ante factum positioning, post factum positioning, consumer-oriented positioning, competition-oriented positioning.

**JEL:** M30, M31.

## Introduction

The paper presents the concept of a general typology of brand positioning. The typology is best described by its underlying two-dimensional matrix where the two key dimensions are "Ante factum – Post factum positioning" and "Consumer-oriented – Competition-oriented positioning." The two dimensions of the matrix are discussed. Then the content of each cell of the positioning matrix is presented and signified via keywords. At the end the possible applications of the matrix are considered.

## 1. Dimensions of the Brand Positioning Matrix

### 1.1. The "Ante factum – Post factum positioning" Dimension

Brand positioning, both in practical and theoretical aspect, is very often shrouded by confusion because its strategic and tactical portions are not clearly defined and distinguished. When dealing with the development of a new product[1], from inception till end, a certain set of questions are addressed:

- Who is the end user of the product?
- What product category will the product belong to?
- What will be the product's differences and advantages in comparison to the competitors' products?
- How will those product differences and advantages be communicated to the consumers?

This is a typical case of *ante factum*[2] *positioning* (ante factum because there is still no clearly

[1] There is no need here to take into consideration how new actually the product is, although this will be necessary when dealing with more specific cases.
[2] Ante factum – from Latin, "before the fact".

defined product offer). This approach has a significant strategic advantage as it deals with management tasks like market segmentation analysis, competitor analysis, customer targeting and development of conceptual framework of the future marketing mix.

On the other hand, *post factum*[3] *positioning* (when there is a clearly defined product offer beforehand) is more of a tactical approach. It is usually applied in situations when there is an existent product and the task is to position it in the consumers' minds or when there is a new product created as result of production and technology logic and its development has not undergone through the above listed set of questions. The "Ante factum – Post factum positioning" axes comprises the first dimension of the positioning matrix and depicts the *scale of positioning*.

The tactical approach is commonplace in real life and there are numerous reasons for this. However, they are all a result of lack of established marketing-oriented philosophy in the business organizations. Business organizations that 1) focus on mainly on the production cost and the bottom line results, 2) develop new products and upgrade existing products disregarding the consumers' needs and wants, or 3) try to increase the sales of already existing products. In all three cases, marketing positioning is a secondary matter in terms of importance, time and resources allocated for implementation. Also in these situations the development of a new product comes as a result of differentiation attempts (attempts to counter competitors' product imitations) instead of strategic positioning.

It is necessary to explain the relationship between the terms positioning and differentiation. Differentiation stands for the achievement of clear and objective difference within the brand offer[4]. On the other hand, positioning includes the *communication* of this real or imaginary distinguishing feature. The communication aims at establishing this feature in the consumer's mind in a way so that the feature is perceived as a significant advantage over the competitors' brand offers. Furthermore, in the three types of differentiation listed above, the differentiation is more of a technology function stemming from the logic of the production process, innovations, production cost optimization, etc. In a way, it originates from within the organization and is not oriented at meeting the needs and wants of consumers. As long as it disregards the needs and wants of the consumers, it can not be identified as real positioning. In this case, one and the same enhancement of the brand offer can be interpreted as differentiation or real positioning depending on the origin of the enhancement. Real positioning is differentiation fueled by the desire to create an offer that has a clearly defined spot among the competitors and that better meets the needs and wants of the consumers. In other words, real positioning is market-oriented and inspired differentiation in contrast with the technology-oriented and inspired differentiation. In the first scenario the positioning stands in basis of the project while in the second scenario the positioning comes at the end – what should be highlighted as a product advantage and how to communicate the advantage of the *already existing* product.

The main differences between the ante factum and the post factum positioning are shown in the table below. The first criterion is the content of the positioning. The ante factum positioning encompasses both the physical as well as the psychological positioning activities (physical and

[3] Post factum – from Latin, "after the fact".
[4] The actual offer, not the product in the offer per se. See T. Levitt, Marketing Success Through Differentiation – of Anything, Harvard Business Review, January-February 1980.

mental positioning). This approach provides the management of the business organization with a vast array of options to explore and allows searching for specifics on both the physical level (the elegant and aggressive shape of the "Jaguar" vehicles hinting of the predator animal; dashboard made of polished walnut roots, etc) and the mental level (the company's website states "The flagship of the Jaguar line defines motoring luxury"). The product and the strategy for its market implementation are developed in advance and in accordance with the available competitor offers and the consumers' requirements and needs. Although this approach brings to light a great number of alternative solutions, it also carries a great amount of responsibility once a solution is selected. The main tools of this approach are the product itself, its design, packaging, etc.[5] On the contrary, post factum positioning leaves the management with very few options to work with because the physical and functional attributes of products are already set. The product can not be altered – the XJ8 model has its design and features and pretty much a set price too. The only things that can be added are warranty and maintenance service, but they rarely contribute to the overall marketing positioning. This narrows down the field of action exclusively to mental (psychological) positioning: leadership, British elegancy, prestige, luxury.

In terms of durability, the ante factum positioning lasts longer than the post factum positioning[6], because the need for modification, refining, or drastic change (repositioning) occurs over longer periods of time. This is apparent considering the fact that the product categories, where positioning plays a vital role, are also characterized by marketing mix with extremely inflexible tangible material products (the auto industry is such an example). The tangible product "ties" the whole marketing mix together as the physical and functional differences and advantages form the underlying basis for development and application of the marketing mix. It is not surprising that the leading brands (for example in the auto industry) stick to their positioning once they find and establish one. This applies even when they extend their product range and launch different product tiers (low, middle, high) or product types – SUV, minivans, etc. Jaguar is promoted as and actually is a luxury vehicle; BMW – as the vehicle for the ultimate driving experience; Mercedes – as the vehicle for the ultimate ride.

The marketing activities associated with the ante factum positioning involve all the marketing mix tools and are targeted at all the participants of the supply chain. Conversely, the post factum positioning relies mainly on the communication mix and targets exclusively the end users. Likewise, the ante factum positioning engages the top management, different functional departments and research agencies[7], while the post factum positioning is carried out with the help of advertising and consulting agencies and in a way is "outsourced."

Both approaches differ significantly when it comes to the last criterion: the ante factum positioning aims at some leadership goal no matter how modest this goal is (from being the leader in a particular product category to dominating the entire market or a niche market). The post

[5] The ultimate position in this field is a situation where the creation and establishment of the product turn the brand into a monopoly on the market for a certain period of time.
[6] When dealing with different product categories, market structures and other market conditions, long-term, mid-term, and short-term can span over a different time frame. That is why I decided to use the rather broad word phrasing "longer."
[7] The research agencies are involved in the pre-implementation, implementation and growth phases and carry out product concept testing, product sample testing, testing of advertising and promotional materials and concepts, market segmentation, evaluation of the distribution channels, etc.

factum positioning's main goal is to get to merely get the brand/product in the race, not winning the race. This approach is usually applied in order to create a certain level of awareness instead of creating a significant competitive advantage over the competition.

It is apparent the criteria overlap and re-enforce each other.

### 1.2. The "Consumer-oriented – Competition-oriented positioning" Dimension

Generally speaking, the distinguishing differences, that are the essence of marketing positioning, can be attained in two major ways: 1) the brand is compared to its competitors and the differences – both tangible and imaginary, are sought in comparison with the competitors' products (competition-oriented positioning); and 2) the brand tries to differentiate itself (physically or mentally) based on the level of satisfaction of the consumer's cognizant needs or by *triggering and satisfaction of non-cognizant needs* (consumer-oriented positioning)[8]. The "Consumer-oriented – Competition-oriented positioning" axis forms the second dimension of the positioning matrix and will be denoted with the term *orientation of the positioning*.

This dimension is independent from the scale of positioning because its positioning approaches can be applied in combination with either the ante factum or the post factum positioning. Furthermore, it is also independent in regards to whether we are dealing with a brand new product category or we are dealing with an already existing product. In this one respect, I disagree with Tybout and Sternthal's claim that the launch of a new brand (regardless if the new brand involves the launch of a new product too) should always start with competition-oriented positioning. "Competition-based positioning focuses strategy on one's position in relation to that of the competition. The effort is to dominate competition on benefits important to consumers. While this approach provides a sound way to build an initial position, once the target attains a basic understanding how the

*Table 1: Main differences between the Ante factum positioning and the Post factum positioning*

| Criteria for differentiation | Ante factum positioning | Post factum positioning |
|---|---|---|
| Content of the positioning | Material & Mental | Mainly mental |
| Durability | Long-term | Short and mid-term |
| Marketing Activities | The entire marketing mix | Mainly involves the communication mix |
| Engagement in the positioning process | Top management<br>The marketing department<br>R&D department<br>Other functional departments<br>Marketing research agencies | Advertising agencies<br>Consulting agencies |
| Main goal | Leadership in a particular category, sub-category, product feature, niche | Presence on the market without any aspiration for leadership |

[8] I believe Tybout and Sternthal's alternative term "goal-based positioning" is unsuitable because it assumes that we are always dealing with a cognizant need and meeting this need in a better way than the competitors. Tybout and Sternthal's terms excludes all the cases when the brand triggers a new cognizant need and offers the solution for this need. Those are often the cases with the launch and establishment of new product categories and subcategories. See A. Tybout and B. Sternthal, Brand Positioning in D. Iacobucci (ed.), Kellogg on Marketing (N.Y.: Jonh Willey&Sons, 2001), pp. 31-57.

brand relates to the alternatives in the same category, brand growth may be achieved by deepening the meanings associated with the brand position. This entails demonstrating more explicitly how the brand relates to consumers' goals and requires insight about what motivates consumers to use a brand. The brand is then positioned such that its essence implies goal attainment."[9]

It is evident that intentionally or unintentionally the competition-oriented positioning sends signals to the consumers and acts as *secondary* consumer-oriented positioning too. Following this train of thought, the consumer-oriented positioning sends out signals about the brand's stance in regards to its competitors and acts as *secondary* competition-oriented positioning. Although there is a significant area of *mutual enforcement* and overlap between the two, there are some significant differences between the two types of positioning orientation. The differences are related to the answers of the following questions:

- *What triggers the positioning ideas – the competition or the consumers?* (Mercedes launched a positioning campaign in the US under the slogan "Engineered like no other car in the world" forcing BMW to retaliate with "The Ultimate Driving Machine." In this particular case the competitor was the trigger although "The Ultimate Driving Machine" signaled to the consumers too – safety on the road, pleasure from driving, ultimate experience from high speed, etc.)
- *What is the focus point of the positioning efforts – the competitor or the consumers?* (Smirnoff resummoned the idea of purity in its 2006 campaign by suggesting every drop of its vodka went through ten layers of willow charcoal for purification. The focus fell on the consumer, but the suggestion was also targeted at the competitors – Smirnoff was the purest vodka on the market.)
- *What are the information sources used to lay the foundation of the positioning – the competitors or the consumers?* (In the first case the brands and the marketing strategies of the competitors are evaluated while in the second case the functional and emotional needs of the consumers are examined.)
- *Which sets of positioning techniques are applied?* (The techniques applied with competition-oriented positioning tend to be of rational natural, while those applied with the consumer-oriented positioning tend to be of emotional nature.)

The difference between the two directions becomes even clearer in the context of advertising in the mass media in Europe and the US. Direct mentioning and comparison with the competitors are prohibited in Europe, while this is one of the most widely applied techniques in the US. In this respect, when we look at post factum positioning, Europe tends to be more consumer-oriented, while the US tends to be competition-oriented. However, there are no such differences when it comes to ante factum positioning.

## 2. The Positioning Matrix

### 2.1. Brief Description

The combination of the two dimensions allows for the creation of a general positioning matrix as shown in Figure 1. The matrix contains four positioning categories:

- Ante factum – Consumer-oriented
- Ante factum – Competition-oriented

[9] A. Tybout and B. Sternthal, Brand Positioning, p. 31 in D. Iacobucci (ed.), Kellogg on Marketing (N.Y.: John Willey&Sons, 2001), p. 39.

- Post factum – Consumer-oriented
- Post factum – Competition-oriented

There is a key word in each cell of the positioning matrix in Figure 2. If I have done a good job, each word would sum up the *underlying* concepts of each of the four positioning categories. What was the reasoning behind each particular word?

The key word in the "Ante factum-Consumer-oriented positioning" is **needs** because this type of positioning is derived from the consumer needs (regardless of whether the need is cognizant, for example a juice maker that squeezes more juice out of the fruits and vegetables, or a non-cognizant need like Sony's Walkman and the need to carry your music everywhere with you) and the development of the product is focused on the satisfaction of these needs.

The key word in the "Ante factum-Competition-oriented positioning" is **things**. It depicts the idea that with this type of positioning, the differentiating factors are derived from benchmarking against the competitors and from the real attributes of the products. The term vague term "real" has been preferred ahead of "physical" attributes because the on numerous occasions the differentiating factor can be derived from the combination of certain physical differences – ingredients, functions, durability, etc; with certain differences that accompany the product.

The key word in the "Post factum – Consumer-oriented positioning" is **salience.** This type of positioning tries to distinguish the brand in the consumers' minds through some imaginary attributes and to build strong brand salience. This approach applies mental positioning. An example of this type of positioning would be the chewing gum Winterfresh and its slogan "Ice Cool Breath That Lasts." Both the product name and the slogan aim at signifying freshness. It is not like Orbit Double Mint or any of the other chewing gums on the market does not have a refreshing taste. However, the strong and focused ad campaign with this slogan and a well-selected product name distinguished Winterfresh from the rest of the pack. On the other hand, it is a different topic whether this strategy is superior to the "Me Too" ad campaigns in terms of sales increase and revenues.

The key word in the "Post factum – Competition-oriented positioning" is **dissociation**. It is derived from comparison with the competitors and usually is based on an imaginary characteristic

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ante factum – Consumer-oriented | Post factum – Consumer-oriented | Consumer-oriented | ***Orientation of the Positioning*** |
| Ante factum – Competitor-oriented | Post factum – Competitor-oriented | Competition-oriented | |
| Ante-factum | Post-factum | | |
| ***Scale of Positioning*** | | | |

*Figure 1: Positioning Matrix*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Needs | Salience | Consumer-oriented | ***Orientation of the Positioning*** |
| Things | Dissociation | Competition-oriented | |
| Ante-factum | Post-factum | | |
| ***Scale of Positioning*** | | | |

*Figure 2: Positioning Matrix with the Key Words*

or highlighting of minor product differences. Although these differences can be minor, they can play a significant role in the decision making process when the consumer hesitates or looks for additional reasons to justify a choice otherwise based on a completely different set of considerations. In this case the comparison with the competitors triggers the buying impulse. Additionally, this approach to differentiation is more rational than the one applied in the "Post factum – Consumer-oriented positioning". The sought after real attributes are trivial, secondary, and can not provide a durable long-term basis for the positioning.

### 2.2. Application of the Positioning Matrix

It is clear the positioning matrix can be used for several things. I will start off with the most obvious and probably most salient issue – the need for a systematic framework for evaluation of the positioning practice and theory (if we can speak of theory in the strict sense of the word). The analysis of the positioning practice (successful and unsuccessful) and theory (proven and rejected) will fill in the cells of the matrix with content and will highlight the specific variations in each category. The need for such a systematic approach becomes apparent as there has been a lot of talk on positioning but alas no meaningful results and ideas have come out of it. It has been three decades since Ries and Trout popularized the concept of positioning but there has been little further development mainly because of the lack of a viable common evaluation framework.

The second practical application of the matrix lies in the classification of the current positioning state of a certain brand and the respective marketing tools. This analysis can provide the company with an answer to the question if the company should bother with positioning at all or should stick to a "Me too" strategy. Many positioning attempts fail because the management has no clear understanding of the current positioning of the brand and the available courses of action and viable marketing tools at their disposal. This uncertainty often misleads the management into chasing chimeras and missing on more modest opportunities for successful positioning.

The third application is feasible at some point in the foreseeable future. It has to do with the development of rules for positioning management based on the positioning matrix. These rules will help management navigate from cell to cell and within the cells following a certain set of steps. This will possible only after the identification of the successful practices and subcategories. ИА