

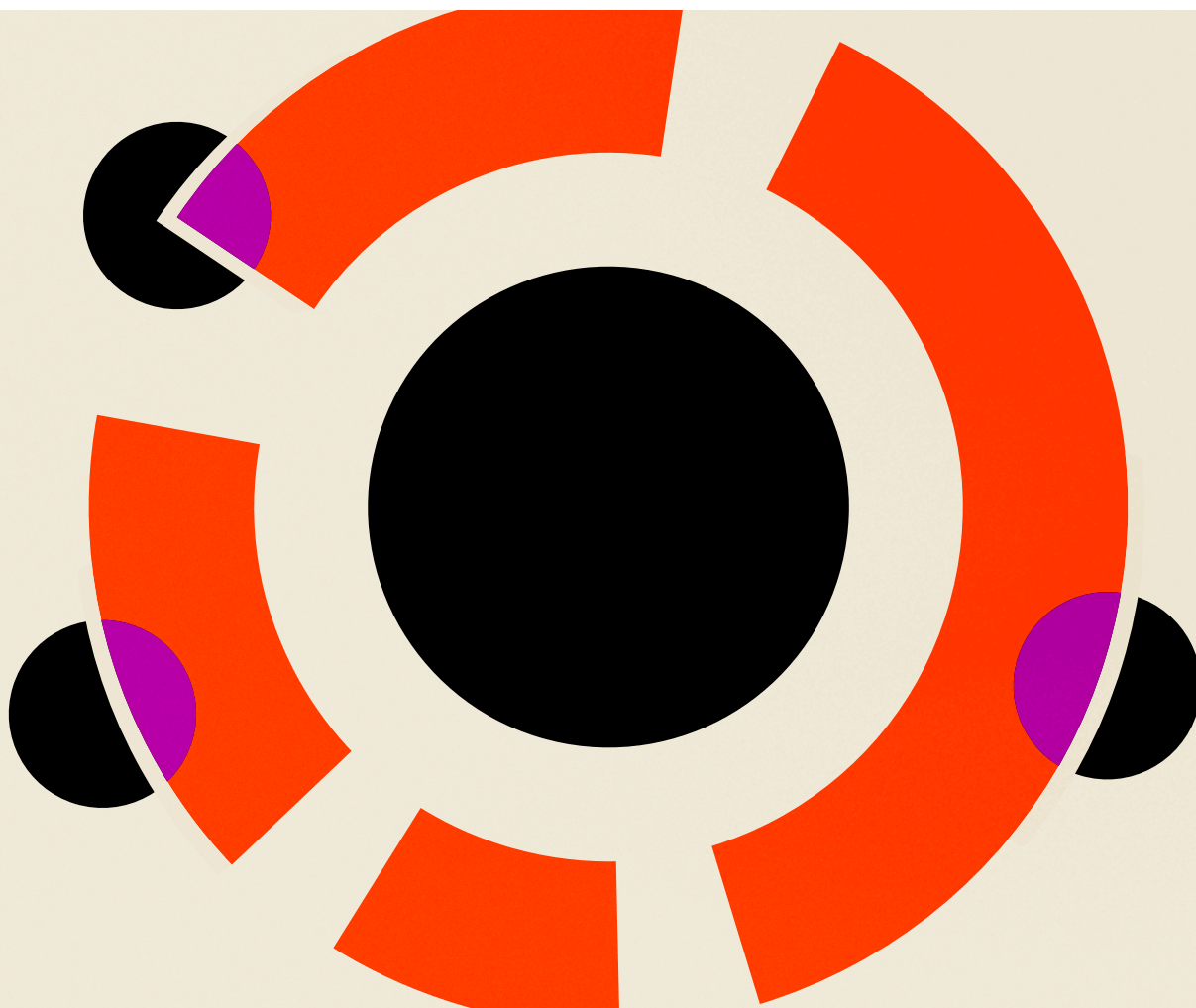


Brand Strategy Insights

The Most Effective Way to Position a Brand

Ask not how your branding agency can help you change the world. Ask how your branding agency can help grow your business.

by Todd Irwin



My twenty-plus years career running branding agencies have taught me what works and what doesn't work in terms of positioning a business for growth. Many trends, perspectives, and buzzwords come and go. New ones continually pop up.

You've heard of approaches like disruption, differentiation, relevance, unique selling propositions, and personalization. But today, what you hear the most is brand purpose. Not just the what, how, or who the brand is, but the "why" you should care and how it makes the world a better place. This "why" is supposed to align with something bigger, which is more important than the straightforward selling of products.

Now, let's get this straight: All of these aspects of brand strategy have high value. They are effective. But most marketers and agencies today sell them as "the number one most important element to a brand." And plainly speaking, they just simply are not. Second and third tier, yes.

customers to choose your brand over the others, is something that few brand strategists talk about. They don't know about it, or they just ignore it because it's not trendy. It's called de-positioning.

De-positioning. You might think it sounds negative. But it's not. De-positioning, simply put, is when you highlight a "positive feature" about a brand, and this positive feature shines a "negative light" on the competition. Not in a way like "negative campaigning," but a positive feature about the company that fulfills a customer desire or solves a pain point. A positive feature that the competitors don't have or can't do very well.

De-positioning is a strategy that addresses the most important things customers are looking for when they're on a buying journey: desires and pain points. Desires = "I want or need something for a reason, and I'm going to buy it." Pain Points = "I have an issue that needs to be solved. I need someone to help me, and it has

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Instead, the most important decision, the number one brand strategy a company can deploy, as agency legend David Ogilvy once said, is "how a brand positions itself in market." And when we're talking about brand positioning as a strategy, its most effective approach, the one that drives

to be the best solution." These are the core reasons buyers buy. Number 1A and number 1B.

Buyers don't start their buying journey thinking, "Let me go out and find a company with Brand Purpose." That's

completely ridiculous. Instead, customers think, “I need something. Let me go buy it.” “I have an issue. Let’s find something that solves it.” These motivations have never changed and are not going to change, despite a slate of headlines by agency and marketing leaders that Brand Purpose is what the customer cares about the most or that Brand Purpose is the driving force behind a company’s marketing strategy. It’s just not going to happen.

De-positioning stresses what your company can do for customers that your competitors cannot while appealing to their deepest needs, concerns, and desires. Your competitor’s weaknesses create the customer need or pain—a gaping hole in the market. And you fill the gap by providing a solution that relieves the customers’ pain and satisfies their expectations. This ability becomes your company’s main brand mission and message.

Apple, the master of brand positioning, displays a recent example of brilliant de-positioning. As the company lost the battle in voice assistants (Apple never loses, right?), with Forbes calling Siri an ugly stepchild to Amazon’s Alexa and Google Assistant, Apple chose to redirect its focus on privacy, in effect de-positioning the competition who can’t deliver it. Apple’s competitors, willing to get their hands on user data and teach their algorithms as much as they can about their customer’s personal information, perfect the all-knowing capability of their voice assistants. This also happens to be what the customer pain point is (transparency).

Apple, which was slowed down in its domination of the voice assistant market,

observed that customers are deeply suspicious of this surveillance capitalism and are yearning for privacy. And since transparency is the customers’ pain point, Apple de-positions the competition by positioning its brand as the “guardian of privacy.”

An interesting point here is that Apple’s example is a bit of an outlier in the sense that by doing this it adds an additional positioning layer. Its de-positioning strategy of “privacy” stands alongside the company’s original positioning idea, which is usability. Typically, only one positioning idea is the foundation of a business—for example, Volvo owns the idea of safety, and Disney positions around magic—but Apple now owns both usability and privacy.

Another excellent example is Starbucks, which owns a concept called “the third place”—you have your home, your work, and then you have Starbucks, a coffee-driven community destination. Name another omnipresent coffee house where you can linger in armchairs, access free Wi-Fi, eat lunch, and use the bathroom. You can’t? This illustrates how the company de-positions its competitors, and with this strategy Starbucks is crushing it. It is the anti-Dunkin’. (Starbucks is now extending its “third place” idea digitally by creating a series of branded NFT collections, the ownership of which initiates community membership and allows for access to exclusive experiences and perks.)

What makes a de-positioning idea effective is its authenticity and simplicity. It’s about creating an association without necessarily spelling it out—a brand needs

to own that singular idea in the mind of the customer. And deliver everything with its brand positioning top of mind.

Since the de-positioning idea is why customers will buy from your company, we must identify it as the number one growth driver. It must sit at the top of the funnel of a brand strategy. With the overall branding—composed of multiple layers of stories and subthemes—bolstering and aligning with the main de-positioning idea, telling a deep story, it all has to come from that place where you have positioned the brand in the market.

The strength of all this, the most effective approach to brand positioning, is that sometimes it can also affect the business strategy. We've worked with clients who have come to us with specific business strategies, and when we started working on aligning a brand strategy, we found business opportunities they had completely missed. Once made aware, they went back to the drawing board and adjusted their products to benefit from the newly identified opportunities. Surprised? Don't be. It can happen.

This example shows not only the power of positioning a brand correctly, but also the

importance of doing it as early as possible. The positioning is something that's going to be with the company for life. And since positioning, and de-positioning, is the top-of-the-funnel platform that is everything the brand stands on, it informs the overall brand story narrative and even, sometimes, the business strategy. Getting it late or wrong can lead to lots of re-work—and, in some scenarios, loss of profits.

So why are so many agencies pushing brand purpose at the top of the brand strategy funnel? Is it because it's trendy? Brand purpose is valuable. We recommend all brands invest in it, but it's not the number-one most relevant message to lead with. The best message, the best brand positioning platform to lead and invest in, is what's most relevant to a customer. Their need. Their desire. Solving their pain points.

Once you've created a strong brand that works to position itself in the market by de-positioning the competition, your business will grow more efficiently. This will, in turn, enable you to invest in your company's purpose. After all, it's easier to improve the world if you have the resources to do it.



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