

# Positioning is the Heart of Nonprofit Marketing

Positioning is at the heart of nonprofit marketing. As described by Philip Kotler, marketer extraordinaire, positioning designs an organization's image and value offer so that its customers appreciate what the organization stands for in relationship to its competitors.

Marketing "pulls" a nonprofit's audiences from where they are to create a desired action. Communications "pushes" out messages. Positioning is the linchpin between the two.

Positioning flows from a nonprofit's mission. Positioning guides an organization into the future and works to build its reputation with its key audiences.

Positioning is strategic. Can you think of anything more valuable than your nonprofit's reputation? And, in this changing landscape where nonprofits must be nimble and quick, positioning takes on even more importance in competition to be loved "or be out."

A positioning statement is a tight, focused description of the core target audience to whom a nonprofit is directed, and it provides a compelling picture of how the organization wants its targeted audiences to view them. A well-constructed positioning statement brings focus and clarity to the development of the marketing strategy and tactics.

How does the positioning statement effect a nonprofit's marketing strategy? According to Brandeo, *an online marketing resource*, every decision that is made regarding the nonprofit is judged by how well it supports its positioning statement.

Brandeo describes the four elements or components of a positioning statement. I have qualified these for nonprofits:

1. **Target Audience** – Knowing your target audience is fundamental to an organization's success.
2. **Frame of Reference** – the marketing niche in which a nonprofit competes.
3. **Benefit/Point of Difference** – the most compelling and motivating benefit that an organization owns in the hearts and minds of its target audience *relative* to the competition.
4. **Reason to Believe** – the most convincing proof that the brand delivers what it promises

## Creating a Positioning Statement

Start with the discovery process. The discovery process should be inclusive. I like to convene a blue ribbon panel composed of at least senior management and leadership. Task them to identify their niche in the market, e.g., market leader, challenger, follower or nicher. Chances are people sitting around the table will have a feel for the role their organization plays in the marketplace. Audience discovery phone calls provide insights from the nonprofit are stakeholders.

If the leadership and staff identify themselves as a market leader, you will have to decide whether to emphasize expanding the total market, protect current market share or expand the market share; as a market challenger, decisions include whom to challenge and how; as a market follower, focus on following closely, at a distance or selectively; or as a market nicher, in what parts of the marketplace the organization will specialize, e.g., which services can be offered through specialization better than larger nonprofits.

The next step involves identifying challengers and collaborators within the niche. Time and again I hear that an organization is unique, that there are no challengers. More unsettling is the belief, especially by leadership that collaboration is not necessary.

Interestingly, as the exercise unfolds, the discovery of challengers (and what they do as well if not better) spurs very dynamic conversations.

SWOT is a tool for auditing an organization and its environment, and is extremely useful. The visioning exercise sets the stage; the SWOT analyzes the strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to your preliminary plan.

Be realistic when you do a SWOT. Be as specific as possible.

Next explore SWOT Interplay. This is where you look at Strengths and Opportunities, Strengths and Threats, Weaknesses and Opportunities and Weaknesses and Threats.

From this you'll learn:

- Clear matches of Strengths and Opportunities through which you can leverage your strengths to take advantage of an opportunity
- With the organization's Strengths and Threats if you need to mobilize your resources, either alone or through your network, to avert a possible threat
- Judgment calls to invest, divest or collaborate where you have Weaknesses and Opportunities
- The need to do damage control where the nonprofit has Weaknesses and Threats

Once you're finished the discovery process it will be time to write the positioning statement. Don't forget that a mission statement defines the nonprofit's purpose, whereas the positioning statement speaks to the organization's uniqueness.

The positioning statement is internal. All external communications should flow from and refer back to the positioning statement.

Don't forget, "If you don't know where you're going it doesn't matter which way you go!" said the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*.

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