

Get clear on your positioning, mission and messaging

For powerful marketing and growth

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Thank you for downloading this guide to positioning, mission and message. These are some of the most important aspects of business growth. The fundamentals and foundation of what you do. But often one of the most neglected too.

Get them wrong and your marketing will fail and you risk your businesses stagnating. But get them right, with a little careful thought and attention, and you'll set your business up for long term success and start attracting all the right kind of clients.

So, in this guide, I'm going to cover the full what, why and how! In other words, I'm going to talk you through:

- what is positioning and your mission,
- how to check if you've got yours right and what to do if you haven't,
- when to start working on them,
- how they interact with one another, and
- why it's all so important.

Then once, we've covered that, we'll stop off and look at your messaging to make sure you're really ready and ripe for growth. And to start marketing.

It's a wart and all look and by the time you've finished reading, you're going to have a much better idea of who you are, who you serve, what value you bring and *your why!*

Make notes along the way and it'll set you up nicely to start attracting the best of all possible clients.

So read on, we have much work to do in a short time.

Why your position, mission, vision, values and messaging all count for so much

Maybe as the owner of an SME you feel that your firm is well positioned, but aren't sure how that positioning fits with the whole mission, vision, values thing.

Perhaps you've defined a clear mission with heaps of personality. But still feel that you haven't quite got there with your positioning.

The danger is, if you're not clear on both, your prospects won't be confident that you're the right fit for them. So they won't buy from you. Your messaging will be blurred and

your marketing will fail.

Misuse of language warning

I have to admit to being lazy here. I am lumping together mission, vision and values on the one side (the HR folk are going to hate me for this, especially my mate Sally B...). And bundling up niche, focus and positioning on the other. Naughty perhaps, but useful to get my point across. Apologies to all marketing purists.

The important thing to remember is that there are two sides to consider

Get them both right, and good stuff happens. Here's why. For your customers and clients to consider you as their next supplier, they need to understand you – and understand what you're best at. That's your positioning.

But to actually *choose* you (and sign that lovely contract), they need to connect with you – and connect with what you care about. That's your mission.

When you get the two sides working together – Mission + Positioning – your clients get the full story, and you get the right client. And your messaging writes itself. Well almost.

Let's take a look at Positioning

Definition of positioning

I know, I know, positioning is a bit of a jargony marketing word, which I generally try to avoid, but there's not an obvious plain English equivalent so I feel like we're stuck with it.

My favourite definition is this one. It seems fairly general, so I couldn't find any obvious, whizzy advertising guru or individual whom I ought to credit for it:

Positioning is the art of getting your business or brand to occupy a distinct position in the mind of a customer. When you do that, people know exactly what to come to you for, and why.

So why does positioning make such a difference?

Because if you can't immediately articulate exactly what you do, who for and why - how on earth will your prospective customers know?

Good positioning wins you new customers

If you're well positioned in business, you'll be able to charge more; reduce your cost of sale; let go of those low profit, poor-fit clients; better articulate who you are and what you stand for; be clearer about who you need to recruit; attract more profitable, good-fit customers; get more referrals for the right sort of work... the list goes on.

So how do you position your business?

- First, you choose a focus and a niche for your business
- Then you articulate that focus clearly – and back it up consistently with real and valid claims of expertise
- Then you work hard to support and grow that focus – take on the right clients, recruit the right people, develop and train them in the right areas, learn about the relevant industries, make connections in the right places.

Simply put, positioning is your business strategy – it's just a slightly different way of thinking about it.

12 questions to find out if *your* business is well positioned

One easy way to assess your positioning is to ask yourself the 12 questions below. If you answer YES to all or most of them, then you're doing very well. You know why you exist, your clients know what value you bring and everyone involved is clear on what differentiates you from the competition.

If the answers to most, or all of them, are NO, then maybe now's the time to think about making some changes.

These questions are most relevant for firms selling higher value professional services in a B2B environment. But tweak a few words and they works for consumer businesses too.

1. Pricing is a factor that correlates directly with the availability of alternatives. Can you charge a price premium compared to your competitors?
2. Do you find it easy to build a list of your prospects?
3. Is this prospect list small enough to feel manageable from a new business perspective?

4. Do you have clear and defined criteria which describe your ideal prospects?
5. Look at the alternatives one of your prospects could use – your competitors. Now change their logos, locations, images and some of the supporting words on their websites. Are you still sure you are different from them?
6. Do you feel comfortable turning down work or clients that don't fit?
7. Do you know clearly who those clients that don't fit are?
8. Can everyone in your business easily articulate exactly who you can help? And how and why you can help them?
9. Can your clients easily explain to others who should buy from you and why? (You can always ask them this question directly in a customer survey.)
10. If you ran a breakfast briefing for your clients and prospects, is it really easy to know what you would talk about?
11. And could you use in-house expertise to present that talk?
12. Do you know who you really need to recruit next? And why?

Imagine yourself answering YES to all of those questions – and then set yourself the challenge of structuring your business, improving one area at a time, so that you can.

Where to start with positioning yourself?

Assuming you've been trading for a few years at least, first look at your history. What were your success stories? Who were your best clients and where did you add the most value? Your most profitable clients? Why was that? What did you enjoy doing the most? What sectors have these good stories typically come from? What do your 'good' clients have in common?

These sorts of questions will lead you to answers that you can begin to stitch together to see where your real story, your real expertise and value, lies. You may find unexpected depth in a vertical market, a rich seam of work connected by a certain nature of client. You may have to dig deep to find the common ground, and it may not be as obvious as you'd like it to be.

Helping you find your niche

You can kick-start your thinking by looking at these three areas:

- **Sectors and verticals**

Do you have experience in a particular vertical market or sector? This may feel narrow to begin with but it's important to recognise the potential depth and breadth within a vertical.

For example, if your expertise is in the health and care sector, this could include working with businesses who sell into the NHS, or private hospitals, or care homes.

Your healthcare industry knowledge and understanding may be highly valuable and prized by this group – but they may not describe themselves as being part of the healthcare sector.

- **Products and services**

The gold standard here is in providing a product or service which no-one else provides, nor can easily imitate. But this is rare, and typically translates into a first-mover advantage as competitors start to appear.

But by keeping up with technology, trends and innovations, you can stay ahead of the pack and maintain differentiation. Look at what you do best, and work out ways to stay best.

- **Size, nature, values**

Do you give the best value to corporates, SMEs, the third sector or sole traders? Are you a truly good fit with the global FTSE 500 blue-chips, UK based charities, or regional firms? Do your values clash or compliment a particular type or size of client?

And your niche is...

Now draw a Venn diagram of these three areas. If you can be confident you are the only firm – or one of a very few firms – offering your services to a specific type of organisation in a particular sector – **then you have your niche**. You have your focus. You have your positioning.

But before you get out and start shouting from the rooftops ...

Now comes the hardest bit: a definite commitment to your positioning and focus.

Whether your story is already strong or just starting to build, you must commit to supporting it. You train your people in it, you network in and around it, you learn from it, you live and breathe it and you recruit in order to grow it.

You must articulate the strengths you do have, and find that particular group of clients – your narrowly defined, easy to identify list of clients and prospects – that will very definitely benefit from what you have to offer.

It will suddenly become a whole lot easier to make a list of prospects; easier to articulate who and how you can help them; easier to price more profitably; easier to find the right people; easier to ask for the right referrals; easier to turn down work...

It should, all in all, become easier to develop and grow your business. *Then* you can go and shout it from the rooftops.

When should you work on your positioning?

It's time to consider strengthening your positioning (or instead of strengthening, read altering, improving, defining, articulating etc.), when you start to struggle in some of the areas below – or some of these statements seem to describe your situation.

- You find it hard to articulate exactly who your ideal customer is because you offer a service that could be used by lots of different people or businesses.
- You find you get a reasonable amount of referrals, but struggle to acquire any new customers from a wider circle in a regular or sustained way.
- You sometimes find it hard to explain – in a way you're happy with – exactly what your business does when you're asked that dreaded question: "So, what do you do?"

Great, you've nailed your position. So, on to your mission. Your why

To explain the difference between mission and positioning, I'm going to use myself as an example.

My positioning is that I am a business consultant. I work with small B2B firms to help them acquire more of the right new clients. I work with firms in Hampshire and

bordering counties.

So far so good.

My mission is that I'm here to help people that were in the position that I was in 11 and 3/4 years ago, to get more of the right new clients. The position I was in (11 and 3/4 years ago) was of having responsibility for new business, but not knowing where to start with actually getting a regular stream of real, suitable new clients in through the door.

And that was despite already having a solid background in (and I thought, a reasonable grasp of) marketing. Worrying, eh?

So, I carry out my mission to help these people by writing articles and giving workshops that freely share the knowledge and experience I've acquired. I try and give them those 'Aah!' moments, when things click and you feel that bit more empowered with the knowledge or tools to get your job done.

I do it because I remember how useful this type of bite-sized information could have been to me, in my situation. I can empathise, understand and help people to get better at it.

I then do paid consultancy work and training in order to earn the living that supports me to keep on helping those people. Importantly – if I didn't need to work financially, I would still want to be doing what I do.

Values and beliefs that support your mission

Knowing my values and beliefs means that I can look for more of those clients that fit with them, and so fit with me. The better the fit, the stronger and more valuable the relationship – from both sides.

Here are my values

1. My new business philosophy is one of helping, not selling.
2. I believe that if you offer support and give value to others, good things will happen in business (as well as in life). So I work with firms that are interested in, open to, or feel comfortable with this approach.
3. I believe that not all clients are the right clients, so you should only aim to work with the ones that *are*. Then you can pass on the ones that *don't* fit to

other people whom you know could help them better than you can. Then everyone's happy.

4. I like to help firms that are determined to improve, keen to learn, have an open mind and are already prepared to put in the time and effort to make the changes needed.

It took a long time for me to be able to write that down as clearly as that (I hope it was clear to you). I certainly didn't have a mission when I began.

When to start with your mission

Some people say you have to get your mission sorted, right from the start. I don't – and didn't. I believe that for most businesses, trying to articulate a mission is a really difficult task and can leave you struggling in vain to move forward rather than getting on with what they do best – looking after their customers.

Some companies are born of a vision or a mission – so it's easier for them to pin it down because that's how they got into business in the first place. For B2C, think Lush Handmade Cosmetics or The Body Shop (way back when). Think Innocent Smoothies.

A local and smaller-scale favourite of mine is Ann Stebbing. She photographs dogs and their people, because she loves dogs and cameras. Perfect – positioning and mission in one. (Oh, and if you've got a dog and want it truthfully and beautifully photographed, don't go anywhere else. I think her work is superb.)

How to create your mission

But most businesses don't have a mission from the start. Or even if they did, it's maybe not one that still fits with who they are now – 33 years after their mum, dad or Uncle Harold started the firm in 1984.

And therein lies the challenge. Because it is *quite* possible that you do what you do for a whole bunch of reasons that are unrelated to the missionary thing. Maybe:

- You fell into it after school / college / University and never left
- It's what you know and you've always done it
- It just pays the bills
- You don't know what else you *would* do

- Uncle Harold would be really cross (or even worse, disappointed) if you left the family business

Well, while I can't solve all the dilemmas above but I can get you started with finding your mission.

Nine questions to get you thinking about your mission

1. If you had a very famous client, what would you want them to say (unprompted) about your company on national television?
2. Which clients have you had the best ever relationship with, and why?
3. Where and how have you made the most difference to a client, supplier or business contact?
4. What makes you really excited and talkative when you're working or talking about work?
5. When do you forget that you're working (but you still are) and get completely into a state of flow?
6. Which part of your work, or your firm's work, would you do 100% of the time, if you could? Why is that?
7. Why aren't you working for your closest competitor instead of running your own business or bringing in clients for your current firm?
8. If you had all the money you needed, what work would you do to keep your brain engaged?
9. Why *aren't* you doing a different job?

If these questions aren't helping, then another great starting point is to think about mission by starting with your *why*. *Why* do you do what you do? *Why* are you in business?

Well-known TED contributor Simon Sinek can get you started far better than I can on this topic. His TED talk is brilliant and will help you with finding your why.

Mission – or career change?

By now, your mind should be a whirl of mission ideas and gut instincts. If it isn't, don't panic - sleep on it, live with it for a bit, play with ideas and come back to it. It's not necessarily easy but you will get there.

If you really are stuck and stay stuck, and Simon's TED talk left you cold, it's worth considering that you could be in the wrong line of work and your own mission is perhaps to be found elsewhere.

In which case, to stick with my values of trying to be helpful, here's a link to a lovely career coach that I know (Felicity Dwyer at Heart of Work), based in Hampshire. She's particularly interested in people considering career changes around those middle of life years. Remember those?

But if your mind is a whirl, stick around because before you pull it all together, it's time to take a look at your message.

Bring it all together in your message

So it's time to start marketing. You're confident of your position, you've identified your mission. You're ready for growth. But what sort of marketing should you be doing and what sort of content should you be creating to achieve what you want to achieve?

Do you know which channels to use, what topics to write about and have you pinned down your tone of voice?

If this reflects how you're feeling, pause for a moment. This is where your positioning, mission and messaging comes into its own.

Getting your messaging right

Lucky name, messaging. Better described - I think - as the (at most three) main things you need other people to really understand, think and believe about you.

Not the itty bitty details of your services. And not necessarily just the benefits. It's much more about the real things that you want your business to be known for. Critically, messaging is NOT what you think about yourself.

A really simple exercise to help work out your messaging

First, imagine you can overhear a really juicy senior-level prospect of yours describing you to their board in an informal discussion about potential providers for a new piece

of work. Then ask yourself, which of these phrases would you really want them to be saying.... (other options are definitely available):

- *They've got the best reputation in scissor sharpening/ship-building/basket weaving out there.*
- *All their stuff says they're the most creative bunch of people in the South of England - but the work looks the same as everyone else's to me.*
- *Their quality rating on TripAdvisor/TrustPilot/ChooseAScissorSharpener.com is 10/10.*
- *Them? They're cheap and cheerful. If we're only choosing on price and aren't too fussy about the quality...*
- *Their health and safety record is impeccable. It's a no-brainer for us. Especially after what happened in 2010, 2003, 1998 and...*
- *I've heard they are the most jolly good fun to work with.*
- *The results they've generated speak for themselves. And they've won loads of awards for their sharpness/ships/weaving styles.*
- *They describe themselves as specialists in education, which is good, but also as specialists in the healthcare, marine, property and defence sectors. That all seems a bit unlikely really, as they're quite a small company. I wonder what they are actually best at?*
- *They've always had very high-tech and cutting edge proprietary software products. I'm always seeing them writing and commenting about that sort of stuff in the industry press.*
- *It says on their website they look after top blue-chip brands, but I'd only heard of two of them. And I'm pretty sure they last worked with them more than 5 or 10 years ago...*
- *They're well known for having the best ethics in our industry. Now that's got to help with our CSR (corporate social responsibility) strategy after our ticking off by the regulator last year. A bit pricey, but better than another hefty fine.*
- *I have no idea what they're best at. They seem to do a bit of everything, for everyone. It all feels too broad and vague.*

- *Everyone says they are experts in branding for new product launches. That's exactly what we need for our own launch.*
- *They sound so corporate all the time, talking about solutions and productivitis and effectivity-ness and all that. I can't imagine they'll be right for us or that we'd get on. We're a bit younger and more progressive than that, aren't we? (P.S. This is a bit more tone of voice than messaging, but you get my drift)*
- *They're really expensive - but everyone knows they are the best.*
- *During our shortlisting they've been so responsive, quick and flexible. They've also flagged a few issues in our own processes - which has been enormously helpful. If they're like that at this stage...*

I could go on. But, happily for you, I won't.

Messaging in a nutshell

When you consider how many firms - and creative, marketing agencies used to be the one of the worst at this - put forward their key USPs using general adjectives like passion, creativity and fun, it's easy to see how these messages could be very weak from a strategic marketing perspective.

Time to work out your messaging

1. Ask your (ideal) customers what they would say you're best at. If they don't all generally agree, then you're probably too broadly positioned. Time to go back and work on that.
2. Work out the least profitable things you do. The least enjoyable. The most hassle things. The things you're worst at. Then stop doing them and stop talking about them. Rule them right out.
3. Do a little broader research on a larger number of people and get your website reviewed - ask them what they think you do best. Not what they think you do. Critical difference there. The answers may really surprise you.
4. Don't forget to segment your customers into groups with similar problems / needs / traits / buying habits etc. Your messaging for each of these can be different when it gets to the detail, but at the top (one or two key messages), it needs to be fundamentally the same.

5. Try and be yourself. A firm which is mostly profitable - with loyal employees and loyal customers - is a good thing. It's good mainly because of how it's led. If you're the leader, have the confidence to tell customers about what you believe is important in business. Those ethics can form the basis of your messaging. (If they're morally appropriate ethics, that is).

Getting marketing right

By now you should know pretty much exactly what it is that you're going to be writing about / talking about / videoing, who for, and why. In short, you're nearly ready to fly (or do some serious marketing).

But hold on a moment. Adopting a belt and braces approach, before you start, here's five questions to see if you're really ready:

1. Are you clear on the overall message you want to get across?

- One quick shortcut here is to imagine your firm's vision in a sentence like this – [ACME Inc] will become the most talked about (or cutting-edge, valued, expert, helpful etc.) [telecoms consultancy] in the [property] industry in the [Hampshire] region. Or similar.
- Picking your words carefully helps you first think about and then work out where you actually want to go.

2. Can you explain precisely who you are creating content for? And why?

- All content should be created with your ideal client in mind, and you need to be clear exactly who they are.
- Bear in mind you may have more than one type, or segment, of client.
- Profile each client segment – by gender, age, income, location, industry sector, stage of life... whatever is relevant to your business.
- Then imagine you're developing your content just for them.
- The why is even easier. In order to give them something of value to them. Because giving things away for free attracts new clients.

3. Can you clearly explain what you want them to do or think once they've seen or read your content?

- You might want them to feel reassured about your expertise, and happy to meet up with you.
- Or you're encouraging them to share a video you've made, or attend an event you're running.
- Whatever the reason, make sure you know it – because if you don't, they certainly won't.

4. Can you think of at least 10 headlines that would all be of some value and interest to your ideal client (although perhaps at different stages of their own buying cycle)?

- It can help to imagine your lovely ideal client sitting opposite you – having just paid for two hours of your exclusive time to advise them on their (relevant) business problem. They're in no rush, just there to listen to you and take notes. But they're looking for high quality advice and information in return. Those nuggets of advice are your headlines.
- You can start by writing down your *buyer's problems*. As many as you can possibly think of. Write them out in their own words, as if they're on the phone to you with their first enquiry, or emailing you at the start of your relationship. What do they say? How do they ask for help? How do they express what they think they need help with?
- Counterintuitively here, the better your focus, the easier this exercise is. You'll find you can come up with more and more headlines as you delve deeper into a single set of connected topics.
- The headlines should become more detailed, more expert, the deeper you dig.

5. Can you easily articulate what is special about you? What differentiates you from your competitors – those alternative suppliers out there?

- This is where your content can start to become original – because you should be one of very few people or firms creating this *particular* content.
- It could be that you have *combined* commoditised products and services in a new way.
- Or you may have a very real understanding of a particular *sector* because of

your experience – so you have insight into those clients' problems in a way that others do not.

- Or perhaps you've built your *own* products and created your *own* IP (intellectual property), so you're first-to-market with something new?
- In a crowded market, it could just be that your originality is in your *tone of voice*, because of the type of business you are and the personalities you have chosen to recruit.
- But whatever it is, it needs to be unique to you.

If you find yourself struggling to get clear answers on some of these, you need to go back to your positioning.

But if you can answer these questions now – or are confident you can get to the answers quickly with a bit of team brainstorming and flip-charting – then you're probably well-positioned and clear enough on your values, mission and message to get started.

My work is done. You are ready to fly. Good things will happen. Good luck.

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I help determined SMEs acquire the right new clients