

Brand Positioning for Enduring Success

by Blair Shane on behalf of IVP

This guide is intended to give you a jump start on how to position your product, service or company with your target audience to maximize the impact of your sales and marketing to sustain growth. Reach out to [Blair Shane](#) if you have questions.

Brand Positioning Defined

Positioning is what your company stands for in the eyes of your customer. It connects your brand with your target audience and gives it a reason to choose you. Positioning is how customers think about your company. It captures how you meet their needs in a better way.

Positioning is summarized as a simple statement describing what benefit you uniquely provide and to whom. An acronym to use when developing strong positioning is CREDS: Compelling (drives desired behavior), Relevant (linked to target motivations), Enticing (creates interest and intrigue for your target audience), Differentiated (different and better from what others in your competitive set are offering) and Single-minded (focused; not all things to all people). It is ultimately about defining why customers should choose and stick with you versus the alternatives.

Your positioning statement captures the following elements:

For **[your target audience]**
who **[target audience motivation]**,
[company/brand] is the only **[category definition]**
that **[CREDS benefit]**
because **[reasons-to-believe they'll experience the benefit]**

An example:

For **automobile enthusiasts**
who **want to make a positive environmental impact**
Tesla is the only **electric vehicle**
that's **stylish and can go from 0 to 100 in 3 seconds without a drop of oil**
because **its power instantly impacts performance, with a 300-mile battery range and a network of proprietary charging stations that let you get anywhere in style**

Why Positioning Matters

To jumpstart growth, startups often sell to whomever will buy without fully understanding who they best serve and why the customer chose them. Then opinions, not data, rule decisions on marketing. But even if a product is launched to acclaim and beyond-expectation MAUs, products eventually plateau unless they have a clear focus on who is primed to buy and keep buying.

The companies that endure usually define their positioning *before* they go to market, and they definitely *refine* it before they throttle up for growth. Below is the process we'd recommend to avoid plateauing and capitalize on opportunity.

The Business Benefits of Positioning

Focus	Whether you're a founder/CEO or CMO, your greatest risk is losing focus. Positioning forces you to prioritize the things that will have the biggest impact, and focus all your resources and energy on them.
A North Star	Positioning aligns your organization behind a single "bullseye" target audience and reason for being. This alignment creates energy and the necessary integration to execute flawlessly. Alignment ensures everyone—your employees, board and customers—can make the pitch for your product, too. This creates lift with selling, hiring and fundraising.
Speed	Move quickly with the confidence of a solid foundation. Positioning gives your team the power to act quickly, thoughtfully and boldly at all levels of the organization. It allows you to prioritize across the entire marketing mix, within sales, promotion, pricing and how you choose to develop product features. It unifies actions from minutiae to high-level strategy, making your go-to-market both efficient and effective. When done well, positioning's lens forces you to make hard choices knowing that focus and alignment will create positive, lasting impact.

Caveat: What Positioning Is Not

Positioning is not a tagline.

It's the strategy that guides development of your marketing and yes, your logo, advertising, messaging and tagline. It's also an everyday management tool, not just a marketing campaign. It informs how you design and refine your product, how you align your team and how you go to market.

Positioning is not external facing.

Positioning is designed to be an internal guide for you and your team, so it's not meant for public consumption. Campaigns and key messages are derived from it.

Positioning is not a one-and-done exercise.

To go through a positioning exercise is valuable in itself; the process forces tough dialog and higher-level thinking. But its real value is as an aid for daily decision-making. It is a living document. A litmus test. Keep it in front of you and your team.

Developing Your Brand Positioning

Many positioning frameworks exist, some more comprehensive than others. Below is one approach from Astrion Partners that I've used multiple times (Stanford, Sequoia, IVP).

Many consulting/brand firms have a variation; don't fret over which framework to use. Yours should share the core components covered here and lay them out for your team to debate and align and then distribute the results to all functions. The value of any positioning framework is in the work you put into it and your willingness to be precise when choosing a direction. It is so easy as a management team to compromise and settle on a positioning that serves everyone. Do not. Your positioning works only if it is targeted and clear.

Bring the right people into the process

A small, dedicated team (3-4 people) should drive your positioning from start to finish. To succeed, it will need input from across the organization. Decide who in your company should fill each of the following roles:

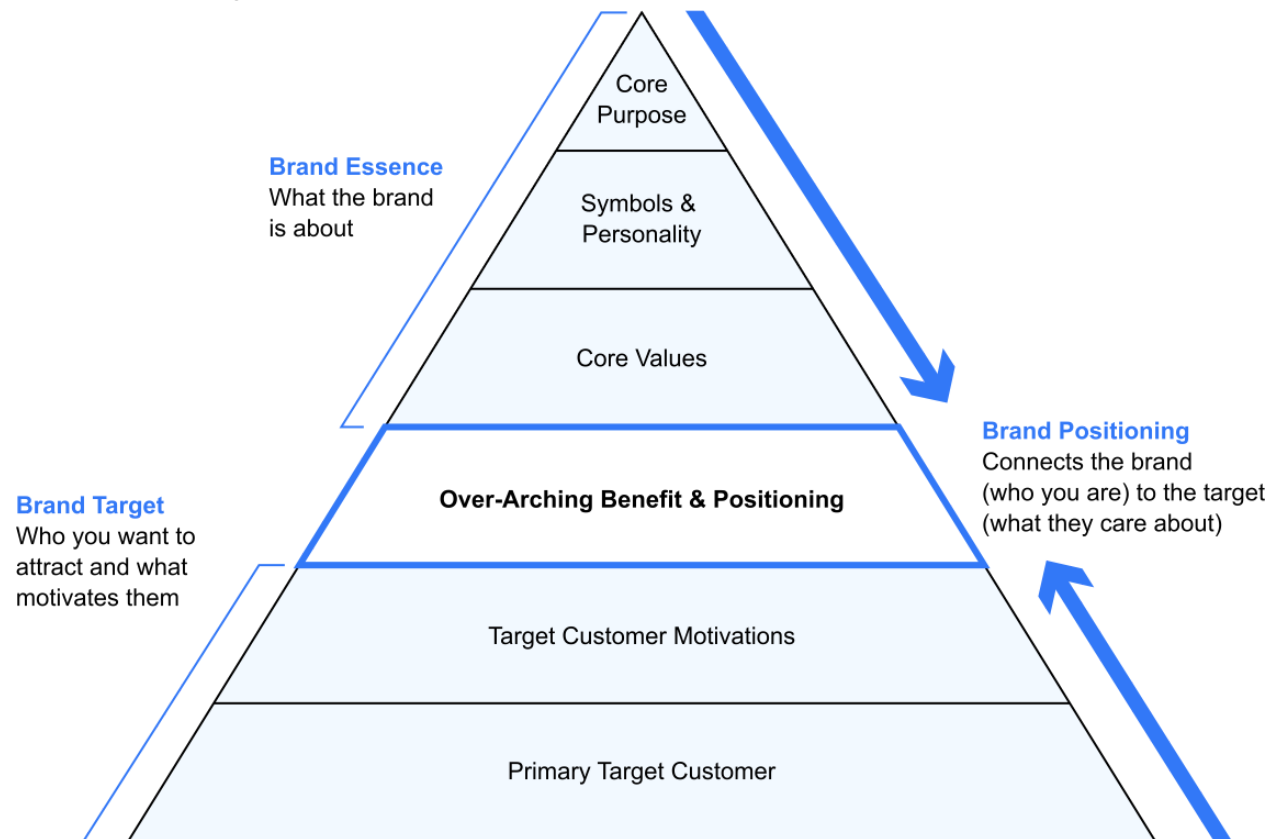
Builders (CEO, Head of Product, Exec Team)	Will spend the most time on this process
Contributors and Stakeholders	Can be limited to targeted involvement pre- and post-creation of your positioning

Once you have the key players in place, getting to a strong, sustainable positioning statement requires working on the two elements that support it: what your brand (or company) stands for and an understanding and alignment around your target audience and its needs.

The Voice of Experience:

If you have creative resources who will help execute the branding work, bring them into the strategic development process early. Not only will they be another outside perspective but being part of the journey will also speed up the time to execution and make their creative translation stronger. Bringing this resource into the early development stage of your positioning journey may cost a bit more but will yield better results.

The Brand Pyramid™



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Step 1: Defining Your Brand's Essence

The first step (the top of Astrion Partners' Brand Pyramid above) is to define the essential elements of your brand. These include:

Core Purpose or Vision

The aspirational statement of why your company exists—how you're changing the world

Core Values

Your DNA—what you live by and stand for; evergreen principles and tenets that impact how you/your organizational brand will behave

Personality

How you “show up” and the experience interacting with you; will also impact your organizational brand voice and tone

Symbols

Shortcut mnemonics, design elements or icons (logo) for your brand

Defining your brand should entail a rigorous discussion of each element, including exploration of possibilities. Define it, then redefine it, then refine it. For your brand essence elements, since these are evergreen definitions, each word matters, so make sure you define it as specifically and uniquely as you can. Eliminate anything superfluous.

The Voice of Experience:

Think boldly when setting a vision. The company's vision isn't just about selling a product; it's how that product or service will transform a market, change the world or change the behavior of consumers. It can help to think of vision as a statement of change: By your company's existence, the world will move from Point A to Point B. Tesla's core purpose, for reference: to accelerate the advent of sustainable transport by bringing compelling mass market electric cars to market as soon as possible.

Phrase core values as directives rather than concepts. “Be kind” is clearer than “kindness” and means the same thing. Think of core values as the DNA of your brand—what it does and how it behaves every single time. Less can be more: strive to tighten this dimension to no more than 3-5 values.

Treat your symbols and personality with care; use no more than 5 descriptors. Your customers will interact with them at some point. Refer to them when you hire agencies, review creative, train customer service or design your workspaces.

Step 2: Understanding Your Target Audience

Who are you going after

(demographically, psychographically, geographically and any other “ally” that provides more specificity)

Focus on the key elements that paint a clear picture of who you want to reach; strive to articulate dimensions that are clear and make your target distinct and actionable. This will help focus your marketing efforts and make your spend more efficient.

What underlying motivations, wants or needs does it have that you can tap into

This insight may include the specific problem you’re solving for them but should also include the more emotional or psychological need that, if tapped, will make them believe in, choose and stick with you over others. This is where you connect more deeply to your target. What would make your target a rabid fan?

The Voice of Experience:

Research your target, including early users. Use quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with stakeholders, prospects and current customers. Play this research back with your team to look for commonalities and gaps between internal and external perceptions. Identify the gaps. Be honest. Talking to yourself and regressing to the mean as a management team is your biggest risk of failure.

Many teams fall short on target audience by failing to be specific. Get granular. Move past demographics and broad categories. Picture the generic user as a block of marble, then carve away with crisp language until just a sharp rendering of your bullseye remains. Give that target a descriptive name to easily refer to your target audience in discussions.

Questions to ask include:

- What are the target’s needs?
- What are the underlying motivations that drive or impact a purchase decision or choice?
- Which of these is most urgent?
- Which is most important?
- Which is most relevant to your company?
- Which can you uniquely satisfy?
- How does the target view you?
- How do you want them to view you?
- How do they view your competitors? What are the gaps in perception?

Step 3: Creating Positioning to Link the Brand to the Target

Next, you want to explore a range of benefits you can offer to the target that:

- **Leverages your brand**
 - Credibility—it's believable; you can and will consistently deliver it;
 - Differentiated—it's distinct from competitors in the consideration set; and
 - Single-minded—it's ONE benefit, not a list of features
- **Matters to the target**
 - Relevant—it impacts their situation; and
 - Enticing—it makes them want to act

Explore 4-8 different options, followed by riffing, building and refinement to make them stronger. Then be honest with yourself and your team about which 2-3 options have the strongest CREDs and make those better. Choose the lead, then shop it (and your backups if needed) around to stakeholders not involved in development (see step 5).

Ensure each positioning option delivers a benefit your target recognizes and cares about. The challenge is to think through your users' mindset while also dreaming for them, to avoid being limited by their current thinking. It should reflect their needs and aspirations and be informed by the bottom of the pyramid in the diagram above. Aspirations matter; ignoring them leaves you with a product sales statement, not a positioning.

Lastly, **make sure the positioning is distinct**: it should be a statement of how you deliver your benefit in a differentiated way. This is inspired by the top of the pyramid (core purpose) and should be unique to your product or company.

The Voice of Experience:

Include a competitive audit. Explore how 3-5 firms in your space position themselves so you can ensure your positioning will be distinct and rise above the crowded market. Don't fret about every competitor's positioning—make sure the world knows how your solution is better and different and how competitors' claims pale in comparison.

Start from the groundwork laid by other layers of the pyramid. The brand essence and target understanding should inform your positioning and complement each other.

Get specific. Be single-minded—avoid more than one “and” in your positioning statement.

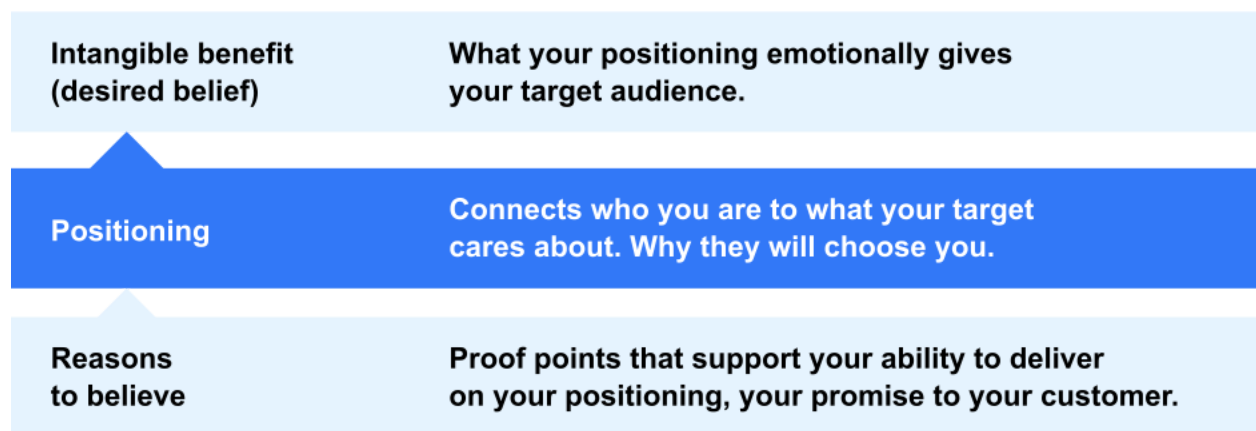
Be clear and succinct—no more than one line. Memorability, use and adoption of your positioning will vary inversely with its length.

Move beyond fill-in-the-blank positioning templates. Yours should be bespoke and take the form best suited to your business.

Step 4: Identifying the Reasons to Believe (Proof Points)

The last step is to identify the 2-3 reasons (often product/service features) that provide key information about the offering and give the target confidence they will experience the promised benefit. This is the time for culling the long list of features down to just the 2-3 that best support the chosen benefit and will resonate with the target. Any more than 3 and they'll forget all of them. Note that the Reasons To Believe (RTBs for short) are very tangible and tactical, reflecting the most important features that support your positioning. They are communicated as part of your marketing when you have more space or time.

Beyond the positioning and RTBs, there can be an intangible benefit to your target as they experience your product and its benefit. It can be helpful to articulate what that intangible benefit is for your internal audiences so you can ensure product upgrades and long-term positioning deliver the emotional connection that can make customers advocates for your brand.



The Voice of Experience:

Make the full list of all your product's features that your target will see or experience, then pull out the #1 feature that will make your target believe your benefit promise. Ask yourself if you need another proof point, and if so, carve that out. And at most, repeat this step one more time. That's it. No more than 3 proof points.

Note: If you have different contexts in which you'll be marketing your offering, or some other point of differentiation for your target (e.g., same type of person in different industries), your proof points can vary a bit across communications. But no matter where you're marketing, never have more than 3.

Lastly, if you're a challenger in an established market, one of your proof points may need to be an assurance that you're worthy of consideration, especially if your benefit requires a

level of trust in you (e.g., finance products, or a safety product). Give your target a reason to believe you'll be there over the long term and will deliver what you promise.

Step 5: Vet and Align Your Team Around the Positioning Statement

With 2-3 options (and your lead choice), now's the time to get feedback to strengthen them and ensure you're on the right track. Begin with stakeholders ... check it with employees (especially sales), investors, other vendors who know your product and your customers and see how they interpret the positioning (clarity) and what they think will work and not work (impact). If you have a customer-advisory group, consult them (confidentially). Consider all your feedback and use it to narrow and refine your choice to make it the best.

The Voice of Experience:

In a team setting, it's easy to seek compromise and get an answer that everyone buys into. It's much harder to choose something truly compelling and different, but it's that choice that'll let you breakout from the pack. Choosing your positioning requires precision.

Step 6: Put Your Strategic Thinking to the Test

You won't know if your strategic thinking works unless you deploy it in more than one situation. Choose at least three executions to test it and make it come to life. This can be traditional sales and marketing like creating a sales deck, demand gen campaign or content. It can also be applied to your hiring criteria and candidate scorecard or new-employee onboarding. Whatever you decide, do at least three things within the first two months of rolling it out to make sure you got it right. Learn from these executions and then adjust.

Resources Available

This exercise is difficult to do internally. I recommend you appoint a lead, and if possible, hire a firm who can guide the process and challenge your thinking. My suggestions include Astrion Partners, PlayBigger, Red Antler, Emotive, Supan Group and Mococo, to name a few. All vary in cost and approach, but that will be money well spent.

What To Look For In A Positioning Resource

The #1 thing is to pick a firm that will roll up its sleeves to dig into your product/service and understand it today and predict where you're heading. You want a partner who pushes you to find a brand positioning that is worthy of your company, not someone inclined to just say yes

to you. A partner who will help give you the focus, speed and outside perspective you'll need. Choose someone who's done this hundreds of times before with all different types of businesses. This isn't about expertise in your industry, it's about expertise in brand positioning.

Getting The Strongest Positioning: Top Six

- 1 Take the time and do the deep work.** Push yourself to truly understand the brand and the customer. Gather and leverage data. Go beyond the superficial to reveal the DNA.

- 2 Explore the boundaries.** Being differentiated in positioning is critical. Get inspired and creative, identifying options that at first blush may seem crazy but, with a little massaging, can be a breakthrough.

- 3 Ruthlessly focus.** Distill the brand essence and positioning down to their essential elements. Be single minded, and stand for ONE benefit that resonates with customers.

- 4 Bring in the creatives.** Translating the strategy into a tagline and other customer-facing communications is critical. Bring a range of creative resources (internal & external) into the translation step and hold tight to the positioning strategy. Landing on a tagline that's both on-strategy and inspirational is tough, so give yourself more chances.

- 5 Get EVERYONE aligned.** Once selected, every single customer touchpoint should repeat and reinforce the core positioning message. This obviously includes marketing and communications but also includes other touchpoints like customer service, sales, R&D, etc.

- 6 Once you have positioning, apply it to three elements of execution and test its strength.**

Credits: Many thanks to Astrion Partners for partnering with me on this jumpGuide. They can be reached at mmckeown@astrionpartners.com and lstoddart@astrionpartners.com.

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