

Article Appeared in *For Sales & Marketing Strategies & News*

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What the “P” in Positioning Really Stands For

There may be dozens of “immutable laws” of branding which are fun to discuss, dissect, and occasionally to write about. But when it's our moment to step up and swing the bat, when we're actually called upon to choose the core identity for our own brands, to make the critical call that our colleagues, shareholders, bosses and customers depend on us to make—only the big fundamentals will do. We can't juggle 27 nuanced principles in our brains, nor should we try to if we want to avoid positioning paralysis. It's time for the branding equivalent of “keep your eye on the ball.”

It's true in any challenging endeavor: the superstars are invariably those who've simply mastered the fundamentals and apply them more consistently than the rest of us. To see it in action is called “groove and focus.” And so it is, that in branding, we've found over the years that the superstars are masters of the following mantra—something we call the *positioning paradox*. Those who never let this rule out of their sight, who remind themselves of it daily, who test their brand development efforts against it at every touch point, who tattoo it to their foreheads and stare at it the mirror every morning before they brush their teeth—are the ones who still manage to brand things mightily these days in a world of chaos.

The rule is this: In branding the more features you show, the less you are seen. The more details you provide, the more vaguely you communicate. The more directions you give, the harder it is to be located. The higher the number, the lower the value.

Sounds almost like Guru speak, doesn't it? But that's why it's a PARADOX.

Amateurs are afraid to leave a single feature or benefit on the table, fearing they'll lose some corner of the market. So they say everything and communicate nothing. They become professionals when they understand and live by the notion that the opposite is true. *By capturing undisputed leadership in one, single, important benefit, you are far more likely to be noticed, remembered and associated with a series of other great benefits--made all the more credible because you have reached prominence in one, meaningful specialty.*

It's the bed of nails phenomenon in reverse. A bed with a single nail sticking up will penetrate you the second you lie down. But a thousand nails can't penetrate anything. The pressure of each nail is completely diffused by all the others around it.

The Positioning Paradox is also behind other axioms like the *Least Number of Words* principle, for example. Generally, the shorter and crisper the expression of the core idea, the more impact. Messaging can be shorter and crisper when the idea is singular:

ADP—*The payroll company.*

Rolex—*The luxury watch.*

Duracell—*The longest lasting battery.*

ESPN—*The Sports Channel.*

Owning the Gold Medal in one critical value like safety or durability associates you to a realm of other important benefits for your target—quality of construction, intelligent engineering, company caring, trust—and on and on and on.

It takes discipline and frankly, some guts for businesses to thwart their instinct to tell all in every communication. But the pros know what the “P” in positioning really stands for: the big positioning Paradox--

In every aspect of branding, you say the most by saying the least. The simplest message wins.

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