

Positioning: The Foundation of Your Firm's Marketing Strategy

By Lenann McGookey Gardner



BC Accounting Firm offers you high quality services at a reasonable cost!"

"D&E is the value-added accounting team."

"FG&H has grown to be one of the largest accounting and business advisory firms in the region."

"The I Firm has a long history in Mayberry helping companies grow and succeed by providing them the following services:" (Look out here! It's time for the dreaded laundry list of services — the laundry list that many CPA firms put on their home pages.)

Do any of these messages really GRAB you? Do they make you want to learn more? And ... do they look familiar — a lot like your firm's Web site / brochures / advertising / letterhead?

Many CPA firms just haven't taken the time to hone a better message! What they need is Positioning.

What's "Positioning"? Your firm's Positioning is the most powerful, provocative messages you can hope to deliver to prospects for your services. For accounting firms, "Positioning Statements" — a list of four to six ideas, arranged in descending order of priority, with the most powerful message at the top of the list, the second most powerful second on the list, etc. — are most useful. The italicized quotes leading off this article contain messages, to be sure, but I think you'll agree that there's little about them that's powerful or provocative.

Why Should I — or My CPA Firm — Care About Positioning? Becoming more knowledgeable about the discipline of Positioning, and then implementing it for your firm, can give you a competitive advantage that gets your Web site read, your brochures perused, makes your business development conversations more vital, and makes your closing efforts more successful! Get your powerful,



AAM Summit 2004 attendees network during a break between sessions.

provocative messages honed, and then that Positioning Statement is the basis for ALL your communication with prospects *whose pain you don't yet know*.

When you create a Web site, you have no idea of the circumstances of the people who will be reading it. Use your Positioning Statement's messages there.

The same is true of a brochure — you don't know the circumstance of those who will be reading it, so use your Positioning Statement there.

Even in a business development-type conversation, if your prospect begins by saying, "I don't know your firm. What do you do?", because you don't know the prospect's circumstances yet, use the messages in your Positioning Statement to answer that question.

Later, when you understand that, for example, this contractor has poor controls on cash in his business, and that he's thinking of selling soon and will require a valuation, and that he desperately needs tax advice, *talk about those things* — this is not the time to bring up your Positioning Statement's messages!

Is Positioning Like a Mission Statement? Actually, these are very different. A Mission Statement is an *internally-oriented* statement of what you're trying to do in your organization

— the reason you're in business, what you are trying to accomplish (your vision) and, often, how you're going about accomplishing that (your organization's values).

By contrast, a Positioning Statement is an *externally-oriented* statement. It's what you want your prospects to believe about you. And it's written in the most provocative way possible, because, currently, your prospects probably don't know much about your firm, and *they don't care*. So this is not an exercise in educating them, because you can't educate anyone who doesn't want to be educated! The job of the Positioning Statement is provoking interest in your firm, so people who could benefit from working with you or your firm will want to be educated.

What's the Origin of the Notion of Positioning? The concept of Positioning originated in a series of articles for *Advertising Age* magazine in the 1970s. Written by two advertising industry talents, Al Ries and Jack Trout, the theory behind the concept was simple: Americans are exposed to anywhere from hundreds to thousands of promotional messages every day. The only messages that have a hope of being noticed in all that clutter are those that are powerful, provocative and short! It's relatively easy to understand how to do

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Positioning for Coke, Pepsi, Nike or McDonald's — it's a little harder to apply the principles to a professional services firm. But the principles are just as valid for such a firm as they are for Nike — if you don't have people's attention, you won't be able to get any message across.

How is Positioning Done? I've worked as a marketing executive at Fortune 500 corporations where months of work, and six-figure budgets, are spent on Positioning. But I've learned that I can generally help accounting and other professional services providers to hone a powerful, provocative message by starting with a three-hour Positioning Brainstorming session. This is NOT you and your colleagues sitting around saying, "Well, what do you think our message ought to be?" Instead, it's a process of responding to a series of questions I pose, to help us get at such a message. At the end of three hours, I have the team's answers to the series of questions.

I return to my office with all that information and I draft something that I think is powerful and provocative that might serve as the firm's Positioning Statement. Then I e-mail that, along with a list of all the ideas discussed in the Positioning Brainstorming session, to everyone who participated in that session, asking them, individually, to comment on what I've written.

When the comments come in, I provide all the participants with a copy of all the comments received and a second draft of



AAM Pres. Sally Glick and other members staff the 2004 Summit booth.

the Positioning Statement. I again ask for individual comments. (If people sit down together and say "Well, what do we think of this?" I've learned that group-think takes over, and we end up with a watered-down message — which is the opposite, usually, of a powerful, provocative one!) This process continues until we all agree that what we have created are the most powerful, provocative messages about the firm that we can hope to deliver to prospects. At that point, the Positioning Statement is finalized, and delivered to everyone in the firm, with a request that they use the Positioning Statement's messages any time they're writing — or saying — something to a prospect whose pain they do not yet know.

How Does an Accounting or Consulting Firm Use a Positioning Statement? On the wall in my company's offices, above every telephone, we have our Positioning Statement posted. Why? Because if someone calls asking what we do, I want the same messages — our most powerful,

provocative messages, the messages in our Positioning Statement — to be the answer. I don't want anyone making up new messages, because these are the messages that work for us. (And even if I hire someone who could come up with a better message than the ones in our Positioning Statement, *we would probably be better off sticking with our Positioning Statement*, because we've spent years delivering and reinforcing those messages. A mediocre message that is reinforced is likely to be more powerful in influencing attitudes toward us than a fabulous message that is delivered once or twice, and then revised for something that is even more fabulous!)

Check out our Web site (www.YouCanSell.com), and you'll see the five messages in our Positioning Statement, with a lot of elaboration and testimonials. Look at an advertisement for us, and you'll see the first two messages on the Positioning Statement, because there isn't space to deliver all five messages. Ride next to me on an airplane and ask "What do you do?," and, if we're flying for an hour, you'll probably get the first two messages on our Positioning Statement. Fly with me to London, and, if you're interested, you'll probably hear all five!

Here's a Test! Put all your associates — or even just all your firm's principals or partners — in a room and ask them to write down the most powerful, provocative message they could hope to deliver to a prospect for your firm's services. My prediction is that you'll get as many messages as there are people in the room. That's a problem — there are lots of messages, none of which are getting reinforced much, and that adds up to no clear image of your firm. In an overcommunicating world, no one can make lots of messages stick. You need your team to be on the same sheet of paper, reinforcing the same messages. What should those messages be? It's the job of the Positioning process to determine them.

The Biggest Single Mistake That's Made in Message Development for CPA Firms: I've been advising CPA firms about business development and



About the Author:

Lenann McGookey Gardner is a Harvard MBA and winner of the American Marketing Association's "Professional Services Marketer of the Year" award for her state. For the last thirteen years, she has helped to substantially grow the revenues of accounting and consulting organizations ranging from U.S.-based local and regional firms, to one-person start ups, to the Partners and Associates at Deloitte & Touche in Europe, Asia and Africa. Lenann is president of Lenann McGookey Gardner Management Consulting, Inc., and will be a

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marketing for thirteen years now. Most of them hire me to teach them how to do business development — but many of them say they'll do message development themselves. And they come up with a phrase or "tag line" they like (my favorite one this week is "Relentless

Results Delivered!", really). Once they have their tag line, they'll ask everyone to use this less-than-well-thought-out phrase or message in all their business development efforts!

How would you react if someone who wanted to sell you something said that what his firm is all about is "Relentless Results Delivered!"?

Thought so. Don't let that be you. At the same time, don't let your firm be the one with a mealy-mouthed message like those that led off this article. Consider working with a professional to hone the most powerful, provocative messages your firm can hope to deliver to its prospects. And then get those messages out there consistently, and reap the rewards! *M*



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