

ADWEEK

Looking in the Mirror

The rewards of a well-defined agency positioning

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Just because others have heard of your agency doesn't mean you have an agency brand. A lot of us have heard of agency names, but we have no idea who they are, what they do, or what they stand for. These agencies have name awareness but no brand equity.



Clients like to buy brands, not generic products. Take a look at agency self-promotion literature —most of it looks and sounds remarkably alike. Most agencies promise to do everything. They are so anxious to try to meet every client need that they don't realize that it actually increases client trust when you tell them you can't do something. Seems like it should be the other way around, doesn't it?

By trying to stand for everything, agencies end up standing for nothing. It's like the client who wants everything in an ad to be of equal size—the photo, the headline, the copy, the logo. Smart agencies remind their clients that all emphasis is no emphasis. The same is true for the way agencies position and market themselves.

You can't please all the people all the time

The thought of leaving out any service, category or potential client sends shudders down the spines of agency executives. But when an agency decides to become a brand instead of a commodity, it will naturally exclude some people. Not everybody will be a prospect.

Creating an agency brand means creating strong, sometimes polarizing differences. Some clients will be attracted to it. Some won't. But that's the idea. The ones who are attracted are strongly attracted. And that's what gives the agency its competitive advantage.

A strong agency brand is a brand with substance and style. But the substance part is first and foremost. A fashionable look is not a brand. A cool business card is not a brand. A staff that dresses entirely in black is not a brand. These could all be elements of an agency brand, but not the essence.

Standing for something

Bill Clinton believed a politician should be able to describe his or her position on the issues in a 30-second sound bite, a five-minute stump speech and a 30-minute dinner address. This is good advice for agency executives, who ought to be able to memorably describe their shops during a 30-second elevator ride, a five-minute phone conversation or a 30-minute pitch.

Agencies don't define their brand as much as they discover it. It's there, deep inside the agency soul, in the form of natural strengths and core competencies. It seems simple, but the key to an effective positioning is to define what you do best and do more of it. As a starting point, consider what has made your agency successful up to this point. What kind of clients have you been most successful in attracting? In what areas do you have superior knowledge or expertise? What do you do well, perhaps better than most? What do you most enjoy doing? What do you hate doing?

Decide up front what doesn't qualify as a strong agency positioning. What agency doesn't promise "strategic

thinking, creative solutions and results"? Shop-worn terms like "full-service" and "integrated" do nothing to set one agency apart from another. They describe an agency that's a mile wide and only a few inches deep.

And what about "creativity" as a positioning? Despite the fact that only a handful of agencies have earned recognition as creative leaders, virtually every one claims creative leadership. (To add to the irony, the agencies that really are creative leaders rarely claim to be.) Creativity is certainly a point of difference, but a dangerous one.

Branding an ad agency means moving from the middle and taking a side. It means realizing that you can't "boil the ocean." Agencies that don't or won't claim a position are positioned by their location. Which is no position at all.

There are a number of ways to differentiate oneself in a commoditized agency world. Focusing on a discipline, category or audience is a good place to start, but the most effective positionings come from combining these approaches in unconventional ways. Osborn & Barr in St Louis transformed its experience in agricultural products into expertise in what it calls the "ruralpolitan" market. New York's AgencySacks is expert at marketing to the affluent. In Philadelphia, Red Tettemer calls itself "the communications company for communications companies," with major media properties as its major clients. And Florida's Zimmerman Partners calls its expertise in selling retail brands "brandtailing."

You may argue that such specialists are not the largest agencies. They are, however, some of fastest-growing and most profitable.

Bringing the agency brand to life

Once defined, your positioning must be brought to life in all your business practices—your product, people, process, promotion and place of business. For starters, consider how a clearly defined agency focus can change the way you select, train and develop your people. Think of how it affects the services and capabilities you offer your clients, the way you promote your agency on the Web, even the way you're compensated by your clients. Aligning your agency behind your positioning can have an impact on almost every aspect of your business.

Your goal isn't to show how you're just like other leading agencies. It's to show how you are different. What's true in positioning is true in new business and agency promotion. Effectiveness requires sacrifice. You can't be good at everything, and you can't go after everybody.

A well-defined positioning can dramatically change the dynamics of new business. In fact, instead of always chasing business, it's possible to have business start chasing you. When clients know who you are and what you stand for, they seek you out. Agencies with a strong focus have a set of well-defined criteria that they apply in selecting and pursuing prospects. They only seek prospective clients who want what the agency does best. This goes against the conventional agency wisdom that new business is a "numbers game," that new-business wins are a function of the "number of times at bat." It's a great theory. It's just that it's not true. The agencies that are most successful in new business are focused on clients who match their positioning.

The Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War*, taught that if you are positioned correctly, you can win before you fight. In the new-business wars, clearly defined agency brands choose their battles wisely, concentrate their forces and win.

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