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Positioning? Have a clear customer focus first

When the brand hits its peak, a repositioning may work but not always.

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Photo by Scott Graham on Unsplash

Decades ago my friend Al Ries and his partner Jack Trout coined the term “positioning” as a way to differentiate a product, service, company or brand in the consumers’ minds. It is still one of the most used and useful marketing tools for driving differentiation for business.

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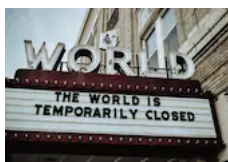
Has anything changed in the concept of positioning in this digital and disruptive age. Executives seeking to successfully position or re-position brands clearly face a number of challenges. These hurdles can often be overcome if they follow some fundamentals.

Foremost, executives must adequately understand and appreciate the principles of marketing. A prerequisite for successful branding is creating an environment where marketing is both understood and appreciated. There are many ways to accomplish this: By taking key executives out to the marketplace and also on client visits. Or by conducting focus group sessions with customers and making sure the groups are observed by management. Most employees don't understand brand or brand positioning. It is a difficult proposition when your company is not into consumer products. By getting employees out in the field a couple of times, you will have made them quite a good respect for what marketing is doing. They will also get some ideas on how the company needs to be viewed in the outside world. Another way is to videotape the focus group sessions for showing to internal managers.

As a small or medium business, you may want to allocate sufficient resources to understanding the category, the brand, and the customer. Brand positioning based on true consumer insights provides the greatest opportunity for success. The most fundamental thing to getting the repositioning right is the work that happens up front. It goes back to having that unique insight and being sure that your hypothesis is right. The worst thing that one can do is becoming off the mark with the customer. Without having the insight that smaller families need fresh, no-preservative/healthy dosa batter, ID would not have made a success of its business.

Once the positioning strategy is decided, executives should look at a pre-launch promotion. Given the competitive scenario and the changing complexities of buyer options and behaviour (online vs physical stores) today, there is a need to do significant pre-launch promotion or advertising to quickly grab mindshare. It is interesting in the tech products industry how the advertising starts before anything comes out. They always do some pre-launch promotion and advertising. With the social media proliferation, it is at once easy as well as challenging to create pre-launch buzz. The last week's Swiggy print ad leading to a buzz in social media is an example of how easy and tough it can be. None if its earlier ads got into this situation although social media has been around for a while before Swiggy was born.

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It is essential to measure the success of positioning efforts. Objectivity is essential and should be agreed upon in advance. Put metrics in place to evaluate the success. Management is more likely to fund future marketing plans when it is known that measurements are in place. There is obviously a drive now towards greater accountability for all disciplines including the marketing. If you have data, qualitative and quantitative, the marketing manager, will be able



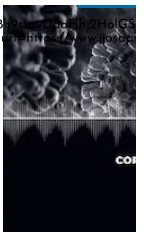
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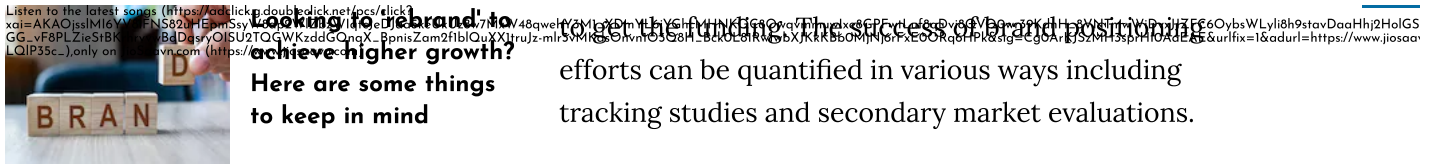
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In my experience, there are four different instances when a company goes for repositioning. First, when a new brand manager takes charge and feels she needs to do something to make her mark. Second, when a brand has reached a plateau. Third, when there is a change in the category. Fourth, when new insights into the category or brand provide an opportunity to develop a competitive advantage. The disaster instance is the first one. No company should allow a positioning exercise when a new person joins the brand. Without any changes in customer or external factors, the new brand manager has

no right to change positioning.

When the brand hits its peak, a repositioning may work but not always. If the brand is at the end of its life, you need to revitalise it but it should be done with considerable consumer insight as to why the brand is on the decline. As my colleague Rita McGrath says, it is important to assess between brand extension vs a new innovation. The best time to reposition is when you discover something in the category or a business opportunity that says you should reposition your brand to take advantage of something that nobody else sees. That is probably an innovation too.

All said and done, ultimately it's the same brand. It has to stand for something. You need to identify that something, the benefit at the highest level that is meaningful to your core customers. It is that highest offering which is the core essence.

M MUNEER is the managing director of CustomerLab Solutions, an innovative consulting firm delivering measureable results to clients.

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