

Why Traditional Brand Positioning Can't Last

Drive any highway from Colorado westward and you'll notice those once wide-open spaces have been overtaken by what developers call "rooftops" – row after row of single family homes. It's not simply the sheer number of rooftops that's so disconcerting, but the fact that they're so undifferentiated and individually unmemorable.

This scenario is representative to a great many things in our market-driven society, where rooftops can be anything from tubes of toothpaste, to discounted airline seats, to cups of coffee. It's a challenge for anyone involved in brand management, especially anyone trying to establish, of necessity, a memorable new brand niche. The challenge becomes exponentially daunting for "experiential" brands, where it's people who are responsible for delivering the brand promise. To do so, they need to be absolutely clear about what makes their brand different. If they don't "get it," they can't deliver on it. Simply telling them it's all about "performance" is about as clear and actionable as a subway announcement.

The reality of our business is that the traditional tools of brand positioning work are of little use in a rooftop environment. No matter how strategically informed, they simply don't yield the depth and texture required to dimensionalize a brand. They're too formulaic to bring to light a brand's differentiating qualities, let alone bring them to life in a meaningful way. Quite

the opposite, they create more of that warm fuzziness we've all grown used to – and immune to.

Whether you refer to the output of these tools as positioning or a value proposition, they're fungible words. A paradigm a dozen. Generally impeccable by textbook standards, also, generally, non-specific. Using traditional methodology to get to a differentiated brand positioning is failing for two reasons. First, they produce the same-old words. Second, it's assumed that by stringing more of these words together, the objective will be met.

You've done this yourself, say, by pursuing a "customer-centric, approachable, yet authoritative, accessible and relevant" path.

Obviously, we all know words, when well crafted, have the magnificent ability to motivate everyone from lovers, to army divisions, to Oprah fans. The reason words, in these cases, work so beautifully is that they have the pith and power to evoke emotions. To leave impressions and change perceptions. To paint pictures which elicit visceral response. Call it visual positioning, if you will.

My premise is that to save a brand from a life lost among rooftops we've got to do some visual positioning of our own within the context of brand development work. As marketers not Hemingways, however, we've got to start with pictures to inspire the pith and power we're looking for. The objective is to peel back the layers

of a given brand attribute to discover the particular meaning we mean to convey. And, in a way no one else in the category has.



Visual prompts make it possible to capture an idea so precise in intent it can unite and drive all brand actions and communications, of paramount importance to those aforementioned experiential brands. Visual positioning can help put into words the physical, the aesthetic and the intellectual nature of something being different – and better – about your brand. And, that, is your end game. So how, exactly, do you go about visual positioning? Start with a general sense of the attributes you'd like to convey, then look for pictures that will inspire free association and dialog. It's not *Pictionary*, but an exercise that requires a good degree of thought, focus and rigor.

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Let's say you're playing with that general concept of "performance." Rule one: Do *not* leap right from the banality of verbal clichés to the yawn of visual clichés. That photo of the shiny red vehicle taking hairpin turns is only going to drive you to those same old words. For richer brand descriptors, you've got to explore areas beyond obvious iconic representations. In this case, you've got to de-link the idea of "performance" from its expected meaning and explore beyond.

Play categories. Think of "performance" as an animal. Yes, a picture of Seabiscuit comes to mind, but that's pretty similar to the notion

of horsepower. Why not pull out that *National Geographic* photo of the ant colony and look at the idea from a more productive angle. Or, how about that shot of the latest Westminster pooch, nose raised in glory. Is your brand performance more about attention to detail? Lead dog, different perspective. Three unique visual representations, three different potential vocabularies for the same attribute.

What if you were to visualize "performance" as a typeface? Would it be hard-working bold serif – or, perhaps a lean, fast-moving sans serif? Both viable, but get a hearty discussion going and you'll find

your brand may fall on another page, altogether.

No matter how you look at it, visual positioning puts pictures to work in a way words-only strategy sessions can't. Pictures generate words hard-wired to emotion, the real driver of consumer behavior change. To establish a differentiated brand presence in a rooftop world requires thinking outside traditional processes. If you look up and see rafters, consider a bit of visual positioning. What you'll discover as you look and learn is that you can't really *say* what you mean about your brand until you can *see* what you mean. ■



The Visual Brand Driver matrix is one of the core elements of Landor's proprietary Brand Driver™ platform. Each unit of the matrix visualizes the intended positioning for one of nine different core elements of the brand. These elements in turn drive touchpoints of the brand in application.

