

Raise the Bar Using the Universal Law of Focus

By Ed King and Steven Winokur, President, Turning Point Strategies

In an increasingly competitive environment, combined with pressures to keep costs down and profits up, companies are facing an almost insurmountable challenge to maintain and grow revenue year after year. Often companies turn to their marketing departments for help, but the answer isn't always the quick-fix they want to hear. There is no marketing "inoculation." Instead, now is the time to concentrate on supplying a focused solution to a set group of prospects. It's a concept we call "The Universal Law of Focus."

Today's society has created a world of clutter. From physical clutter in basements to clutter in our offices to media clutter everywhere we look. Human brains are being trained to shut out many of these stimuli. In fact, research suggests that a person has to view or hear an ad *nine* times before it even registers. Is it a lost cause for marketers today? Of course not. Businesses simply must adapt, and that means focus.

When the human brain senses that someone is providing a specific solution to a problem it has, it will pay attention. A business' job, therefore, is to provide a focused solution. There are basically three things that a company can do to focus:

1. Choose a specific target market.
2. Choose a focused and compelling message.
3. Choose the most appropriate means to deliver the message.

The more you focus your brand, the more the marketplace will reward you.

By making the decision to focus in these three ways, a company will be rewarded by:

1. Gaining a larger percentage of customers among the chosen target market.
2. Gaining high belief and acceptance of the brand promise.
3. Garnering a premium price in the category.

Let's take a look at the Universal Law of Focus

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The three triangles with green tips represent a company's action – focus. The inverted triangles represent the market's reaction to focus. The more focused a company gets, the higher they are on the chart. The higher they are on the chart, the more rewarded they will be in the marketplace.

An organization's goal is to have a straight, horizontal line near the top of the chart...in the green area. By *Raising the Bar* among the three action triangles (a company's branding efforts), the other three (market reaction of the branding efforts) will follow giving the company a straight, horizontal line near the top of the chart.

This means the company has first, selected a specific and narrow target market, second crafted a focused, differentiated message for that market, and third executed and implemented that message consistently and completely. Because of this focus, they are rewarded in the marketplace by capturing a large percentage of that market as clients, by gaining acceptance and believability of the brand message, and by garnering a premium price as compared to other available options in the marketplace.

Seems simple and easy, right? Simple? Yes. Easy? No.

Focus takes risk. That's why most companies don't focus nearly enough. They are directly rewarded for their risk. Take a small risk, like only eliminating 10% of your target market, and realize a small reward. Take a bigger risk, like only focusing on a small fraction of prospects (eliminating maybe 80% of the target market universe), and realize bigger returns such as a more loyal customer base that buys more products at a higher price.

Here's how most companies end up rationalizing their decisions.

1. When it comes to choosing a smaller fraction of the target market to pursue instead of the entire universe of prospects, most companies don't want to lose an opportunity to sell to everybody.
2. When it comes to focusing on a unique and differentiated message, most companies want to get across in their message everything they do, so the message gets diluted making it sound like everyone else's message.
3. When it comes to consistent and complete brand implementation, most companies are shortsighted and think that branding is only what their logo looks like. They would rather not risk the time or money involved in thoroughly and consistently communicating their brand from every aspect of their company.

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The good news for you is that most companies will remain this way.

The bad news for them is that they won't know why their marketshare continues to erode year after year.

What we're talking about here is the art of positioning a company correctly in the marketplace. Just like Volvo standing for safe cars, and Apple standing for simple, easy to use computers and devices, a business should stand for something in the market.

The best, most effective positioning strategies are those that focus on one particular attribute or benefit.

This simple, yet focused strategy tends to be a challenge for corporations. Studies suggest, however, that humans respond best to messages that are focused on only one attribute.

Take an example of picking up a handful of pebbles and tossing them into a still pond. Because each pebble doesn't carry much weight, they might be tossed eight or ten feet into the water. These widely scattered pebbles produce a myriad of small ripples going in all different directions, many of them running into one another, and canceling each other out of existence.

In contrast, launching a baseball-sized rock into the water might travel 20 or 30 feet. The effect is one big splash with large, concentric ripples radiating outward. The ripples are so large, in fact, that they may actually be able to make small waves on the shore.

The volume of each throw was equivalent to a handful of stone, yet one had a much more significant impact on the pond's surface. In positioning, a rock is better than pebbles. This scenario entices you to ask this question, "How does our company correctly position itself within the competitive landscape in order to make the biggest splash?"

The best way to determine what to stand for is to follow this checklist:

1. What one thing are we already known for?
2. What one thing do we do better than anyone in the market?
3. Does our target market care about that one thing? (If not, find the next best thing)
4. Does any other company own that attribute or benefit in the market?

So, what does a target market look like? Is it everyone who could potentially buy our product or service? No. Similar to a focused message, a target market should also be focused.

The best way to narrow a chosen target market would be to determine what characteristics make up your ideal customer. Use this collection of traits to outline your ideal customer. In fact, give that person a name, and dedicate your company's efforts on serving that person's needs. It may mean eliminating a significant group of potential prospects. That's OK because the group that is left will automatically look to you as the expert...after all, you are providing a specific solution to solve their particular problem.

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Once you've determined your focused message, and to which chosen target market you've decided to pursue, it should be written, and may look something like this:

At (company or brand name), we promise to (solve this specific problem or perform this specific service) for (chosen target market), so they can (realize this ideal benefit).

(Company or brand name) is unique because no one else offers (proprietary, exclusive service, process or offering).

With a written strategy in place, the next step is to execute the strategy completely and consistently throughout the organization...from company collateral to staff participation to sending out press releases to ad campaigns.

Promoting a message and a brand promise isn't just limited to PR campaigns and billboards. It has to start from the inside. Everyone in the company should know, on a core level, what the company is about. That is done through setting an example and training everyone on the story of the company.

Once everyone inside the organization knows the essence of the brand, you can begin to promote it externally. This starts with the company name, logo, collateral, training, website, PowerPoint presentations, signage, ad campaigns, etc.

An internal audit of these materials should be done making sure these things are aligned with the unique message and brand promise. If they aren't, then they should be re-done.

Building a focused brand in the minds of a chosen target market takes effort and commitment from an entire organization, which are characteristics that cause difficulties for many companies. Those companies that decide to focus upon a chosen target market with a specific and meaningful message, and do so consistently, stand the best chance of growing consistent revenues over time and succeeding.

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