



THE VISUAL HAMMER

by Al Ries

Thirty-one years ago, Jack Trout and I wrote a book entitled ***Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind***. In the years that followed, 'positioning' became one of the most talked-about concepts in the marketing community.

Our leading marketing publication (Ad Age) selected positioning as one of the 75 most important ideas of the past 75 years. In 2009, readers of Ad Age selected Positioning as 'the best book they've ever read on marketing'. To date, more than a million copies of the Positioning book have been sold, not including 400,000 copies in China alone.

Thirty-one years is a long time for any idea to remain relevant, especially in the fast-changing world of marketing. By now, positioning is probably obsolete. Or is it?

Many companies still write positioning statements for their brands. Many marketing programs still call for establishing positions in consumers' minds. Yet positioning has a weakness. Invariably positioning strategy is expressed verbally. In spite of the many successes of verbal positioning strategies, it may come as a surprise to some readers that the best way into a human mind is not with words at all. It's with visuals.

In 1973, psychology professor, Lionel Standing, conducted a research study in which he asked subjects to look at 10,000 images over a five day period. Each image was presented for just five seconds each. When the subjects were showed pairs of images (one they had seen before and one they had not seen), they remembered 70 percent of the images they had seen before. That is phenomenal. Try presenting 10,000 advertising slogans for five seconds each and see how many of them a person will remember five days later.

***What verbal messages stick in consumers' minds?
What's the glue that holds some concepts in a person's memory for years, even decades? Emotion.***

Visuals have an emotional power that printed words or aural sounds do not. Observe people at a theater watching a movie. They'll laugh out loud, sometimes even cry. Now observe a person reading a novel, perhaps the same novel the motion picture was based on. Seldom will you see any outward signs of emotional involvement.

Consider the cowboy which turned Marlboro into the world's best-selling cigarette. Many brands have tried to emulate the Marlboro cowboy. Among other things, they have tried monkeys, donkeys, dogs, frogs, elephants, kids, babies, celebrities and thousands of other visual devices.

But Marlboro had more than a visual hammer. It also had a nail.

At the time of Marlboro's introduction, the vast majority of competitive brands were "unisex." Marlboro was the first masculine cigarette. That was the verbal nail. While the objective of a positioning program is to put a word or a verbal concept into consumers' minds, the best way to do that is not with words at all. It's with a visual that has emotional appeal.

You need two things to build a brand. The 'position', a verbal concept, is the nail. The tool that hammers the positioning nail into consumers' minds is the Visual Hammer. That's the title of a new book written by my daughter and partner, Laura Ries, and I fully expect it to become as famous as Positioning ever was.



Al Ries ran an advertising agency in New York City for 28 years. In 1994, he joined his daughter Laura Ries to form a marketing consulting firm in Atlanta, Georgia called Ries & Ries.
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