

Market and brand-oriented schools of positioning

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to revise the concept of positioning to differentiate between fundamental approaches to it and chart a scheme of schools of positioning.

Design/methodology/approach – An extensive literature review traces the roots and evolution of the concept. Two approaches to positioning are explored and related to the paradigms of market and brand orientation. Based on current theory and practice, different schools of positioning are identified and categorized along a market- and brand-orientation spectrum. Metaphors differentiate schools of positioning, illustrated by case examples.

Findings – Positioning is a key concept in marketing, branding and strategy. However, its theoretical and practical usefulness is in peril due to its many meanings, applications and overall vagueness. There is a need for a theoretical overview of positioning, which the literature currently lacks. Two approaches to define a brand's position are identified and introduced: market- and brand-oriented positioning. Five principal schools of positioning show how these are different and why differentiating between them matters. The choice of school implies the market- and/or brand-oriented approach to positioning.

Research limitations/implications – Further empirical case-based research might investigate when, what and how different positioning schools are applied in practice. The brief cases in this paper indicate a dynamic over time regarding the applications of the brand- and market-oriented school of positioning. An in-depth theoretical and practical investigation of the dynamics of positions would be of value for the research field.

Practical implications – The distinction among different schools of thought helps bridge the gap between the theory and practice of positioning. A specific positioning objective can guide management in the selection of a particular school of positioning, which enables management to make more insightful conscious choices regarding its opportunities, limitations and consequences.

Social implications – Position and positioning is of relevance in society in broad terms, e.g. in sports, politics and culture. Positioning strategy is discussed and implemented in different industries (business-to-business and consumer), for all kinds of brands (including, for instance, corporate brands) and for "brands" in the very widest sense (such as places or people).

Originality/value – This paper relates positioning to the fundamental discussion of brand and market orientation. It integrates positioning research and provides a structured overview of the concept.

Keywords Positioning, Market orientation, Brand orientation, Brand-oriented positioning, Market-oriented positioning, Schools of positioning

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Positioning [. . .] *This curious verb is in great favour among marketing experts, but no two of them agree what it means* (Ogilvy, 1983, p. 12).

Academics and practitioners consider *positioning* to be one of the key elements in marketing, branding and strategy (Aaker, 1996; Esch, 2010; Hooley *et al.*, 2008; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2012; Porter, 1996; Ries and Trout, 2001; Riezebos and van der Grinten, 2011; Zednik and Strebinger, 2008). In managing a brand (all types of brands), the brand platform defines its key elements. The long-term brand policy specifies the strategic intent, or the position that the brand aims to occupy, and the values and promises it represents. In practice, brand positioning

statements typically summarize a story that supports the brand and shows how internal and external stakeholders should see the brand's position (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2010; Keller, 2012; Urde, 2003). Positioning is typically discussed in relation to the concepts of *brand essence* (Barnham, 2009; de Chernatony, 2001), *value proposition* (Knox, 2004; Slater, 1997), *brand differentiation* (Aaker, 2004; Clancy and Trout, 2002), *brand personality* (Aaker, 1997; Plummer, 2000) and *brand identity* (de Chernatony, 1999; Kapferer, 2012).

Echoing Ogilvy's skepticism, Park *et al.* (1986, p. 139) criticize the positioning concept for providing "little guidance in managing and maintaining a consistent image over time". Other authors accept its potential strategic utility, offering a variety of explicit and implicit definitions of the term. For instance, Aaker and Shansby (1982, p. 56) view positioning as a strategic decision related to "the customer's perception and choice decisions", while Keller and Lehman (2006, p. 740) see it as setting "the direction of marketing activities and programs – what the brand should and should not do with its marketing". Kapferer (2012) encapsulates his view of positioning by providing the answers to four essential questions:

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at www.emeraldinsight.com/1061-0421.htm



Journal of Product & Brand Management
23/7 (2014) 478–490
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited [ISSN 1061-0421]
[DOI 10.1108/JPBM-11-2013-0445]

- (1) For whom? (segmentation)
- (2) In which market? (target market)
- (3) Promising what? (key elements of the brand core)
- (4) Proven by what? (evidence supporting the value proposition)

Esch (2010) takes the broad view that positioning is the foundation of brand management.

Although there is strong general agreement in theory and practice that positioning is important, the variety in the cited definitions reveals a lack of equally strong agreement about what it means, and when and how to apply it (Aaker and Shansby, 1982; Ogilvy, 1983; Mühlbacher *et al.*, 1994; Marsden, 2002; Pollay, 1985). The lack of general agreement regarding the positioning concept is not surprising, considering its evolution from the 1970s, and its initial focus on advertising. First, the concept of positioning is adopted by different theoretical disciplines such as marketing, branding and strategy. Second, the concept is applied to various contexts, such as advertising, brand portfolio planning and corporate strategy. Third, it is used for diverse tasks, such as

- “positioning an advertising to cut through the noise”;
- “positioning a brand to become more premium”; and
- “positioning a business entity in a new market”.

Finally, people in various organizational roles and functions (internally and externally) utilize the concept. During one of our interviews, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Electrolux described an executive meeting with “the new competitive corporate positioning” on the agenda. The company’s lead advertising agency was invited to give input, but instead presented suggestions for a new tagline. The senior management team expected a structured analysis of the brand portfolio and the market, so was bewildered: “Their [the agency’s] message flew over our heads like a Frisbee”. This situation is a case of conflict between different perspectives on positioning.

The wide use of the positioning concept underlines its importance, usefulness, and applicability. However, its vagueness is a serious issue in practice. For example, confusion regarding type(s) of positioning discussed during marketing, branding and/or strategy meetings is frustrating. Worse, it may result in wrong decisions. Many managers are in-charge of selecting, applying and evaluating the positioning of their brands and/or corporations without a structured, accessible overview of the concept. Furthermore, there may be uncertainty regarding opportunities, limitations and consequences associated with a particular type of positioning. Ironically, positioning risks becoming a victim of the attention it received from practitioners and academics. When a concept is seen as a panacea for all problems and issues, its theoretical value and practical relevance are in peril.

In principle, all established brands have a position. The actual position of a particular brand may be more or less clear in the market and for its key audiences, and it may be more or less matched with the brand owner’s intentions. All of the brand owner’s activities and choices affect the brand’s position. Likewise, all activities and choices by others (for example, competing brands’ positioning efforts) potentially affect the brand’s position. This paper uses the term *position* to describe the strategic choice of a position for a brand

(intended position) and the resulting outcome (actual position). *Positioning* is the management process that seeks to establish a new position in markets and minds or modifies (fortify or change) an existing one. This requires “analytical ability, patience, creativity, imagination and sheer instinct – but above all, it demands wisdom” (Brooksbank, 1994, p. 14).

The challenge for brand management in positioning is twofold:

- (1) How should the intended position be defined?
- (2) How should the process of positioning be designed, executed and followed up?

The existing academic and practitioner literature on positioning offers a number of approaches, models and techniques (Aaker, 1996; de Wit and Meyer, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2012; Riezebos and van der Grinten, 2011; Rossiter and Percy, 1997; Zednik and Strebing, 2008). Management’s issue is not a lack of options, but rather choosing the right overall approach in defining the brand’s position and to select the “right tool” for the positioning process. There is a need to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Against that background, this paper’s purpose is to revise the concept of positioning to differentiate between its fundamental approaches and chart a scheme of schools of positioning. The history of Ogilvy’s “curious verb” demands a discussion that is both broad (relating it to similar concepts) and focused (exploring its meaning and application), and is capable of mapping the route forward.

The next section reviews relevant literature, highlighting the evolution of positioning mindsets and research traditions. In the third section, the paradigms of market orientation and brand orientation make a higher-level distinction between these two fundamental approaches to positioning. The fourth section further integrates the literature into five schools of positioning to specify the concept’s diversity and illustrate how it is comprehended and implemented. We select a game metaphor for each school to capture the essence of how positioning can be distinctively understood, placing it along a market- and brand-orientation spectrum. The final section discusses findings and concludes with theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Evolution in positioning research

The roots of the Latin-derived noun *position* lie in the study of logic and philosophy. To *posit* is to assert a proposition or thesis for affirmation. The position of an object is its spatial location, or its proper/appropriate place in a context. Grammatically, *positioning* can be either a noun or a verb. It is used as a verb to describe the process and signify an activity. For example, in sea navigation, a position (noun) is defined two-dimensionally with the help of latitude and longitude. To arrive at an intended position, the navigator sets a course and compensates for currents, wind, and waves. In a regatta, the skipper will also need to consider the competing yachts’ changing positions *vis-à-vis* the positioning (verb) of their own yacht. In parallel, a brand’s intended position in the marketplace must be defined (which differs from its actual position). In positioning the brand, external elements such as trends, new technologies, and changing customer behavior

must be considered. In competition, brand managers must also compensate for competing brands' changing positions in positioning their own brand.

2.1 Positioning and marketing management

In the marketing discipline, brand positioning can be traced back to the unique selling proposition (USP), developed in the 1950s by Rosser Reeves of the Ted Bates advertising agency as a key element of advertising strategy (Brandstoke, 2009). The logic was that every product must diligently communicate a single distinctive benefit to its customers (Keller, 2012; Holt, 2004; Hooley *et al.*, 2008).

In the early 1970s, Ries and Trout published a series of articles on positioning in the US trade magazine *Advertising Age*. They elaborated their manifesto in a best-selling book, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*. It argued that in an "over-communicated society", in which the volume of commercial messages far exceeds the individual's mental processing capacity, marketers must focus on how to get into the minds of consumers. This requires making challenging decisions about how a brand might stand out from its competitors and how it might be perceived as superior on a choice dimension (Ries and Trout, 1986, 2001). This "mind-share" perspective became the common *leitmotif* in textbooks on marketing management (Holt, 2004). The essence of mind-share positioning is simplicity and persistence. It distills the diverse features of a product or service, its competitors and the marketplace into a simple easily understood message. A company's marketing communications focus should be on developing the positioning proposition in a consistent and congruent way to occupy a distinct place in the minds of the consumer (Hooley *et al.*, 2008; Kotler *et al.*, 2009; Ries and Trout, 1986, 2001; Rossiter and Percy, 1997). For example, Rossiter and Percy (1997) discuss a product brand's *location*, referring to how it can be positioned within its category. A central location requires that the brand be positioned to deliver all benefits associated with a specific product category, while a differentiated location requires that brand communicate difference on some dimensions.

Over the years, positioning typologies have applied different perspectives. These range from conceptual (Aaker and Shansby, 1982; Wind, 1982, 1990) to empirical (Crawford, 1985; Easingwood and Mahajan, 1989). Positioning typologies can also be managerial- (Hooley and Saunders, 1993; Hooley *et al.*, 1998) or customer-derived (Blankson and Kalafatis, 2004; Diwan and Bodla, 2011). In other words, a specific typology can be based on positioning dimensions from an organizational perspective (such as low vs high price, premium vs basic quality and innovation vs imitation) or how customers perceive positioning dimensions (such as top of range, value for money and attractiveness). Positioning typologies are important because they identify types of positioning strategies and influence the understanding of the concept. Essentially, typologies underpin the operationalization of a concept such as positioning.

2.2 Positioning and brand management

From a brand management point of view, positioning involves highlighting distinctive features of a brand and

making them attractive to customers and stakeholders. The terms *points of parity* (similar features shared by all competitors) and *points of difference* (distinct brand aspects) describe what must be balanced to influence consumers' perceptions (Keller, 2012). This view of the process is particularly relevant for consumer product branding and builds on the scientific tradition of cognitive psychology (Heding *et al.*, 2009). It recognizes that the actual power in constructing a brand resides in the minds of consumers and in what they have learned and experienced of the brand over time (Keller and Lehmann, 2009).

The *brand-concept management framework* (Park *et al.*, 1986) was developed to guide the selection, implementation and control of a brand image over time. Its originators proposed that a formal long-term brand concept is an investment that could deliver sustained competitive advantage. During the selection, introduction, elaboration and fortification processes of the brand concept, the framework would prescribe specific positioning strategies and decisions based on functional (Clorox bleach), symbolic (Brooks Brothers shirts) or experiential (Lego building-blocks) brand meanings. The framework also would permit flexibility in implementation during the lifecycle of the brand. Empirical research confirms that brand functionality and symbolism are distinct concepts in consumer perceptions and can be used together (Bhat and Reddy, 1998). Park *et al.*'s (1986) article launches the area of brand extension research, in which positioning is important (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Ambler and Styles, 1997; Sheinin, 1998; Smith, 2003).

An important development in the field of strategic brand management relates the positioning of a brand to its identity (de Chernatony, 2009, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Riezebos and Van der Grinten, 2011). This perspective builds on the scientific tradition of socioeconomic interpretivism (Heding *et al.*, 2009). Making a well-considered position choice on the basis of brand identity is the start of product or service innovation, design strategy, employee motivation and the entire communication and image-building process (Riezebos and Van der Grinten, 2011). Brand identity summarizes the vision, key beliefs, core values and extended values of a product, service or organization (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012; Urde, 2003). Positioning takes advantage of a specific aspect of identity at a given point in time, in a given market, and against a defined set of competitors. This perspective highlights the general understanding of positioning's role to "not reveal all the brand's richness of meaning nor reflect all of its potential", while "brand identity provides the framework for overall brand coherence" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 154). Moreover, brand identity should provide a value proposition to the customer, constructed around functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits (Aaker, 1996), as well as participatory benefits (such as co-creation), to increase the intimacy between brand and customer (Ind *et al.*, 2013). Introducing identity into the discussion of strategic brand management broadens the research area. This contributes to alternative perspectives on positioning and emphasizes the idea of defining an identity-based position for long-term brand management.

2.3 Positioning and strategic management

In strategic management, the discussion of competitive positioning goes back to the mid-1960s, when strategy began to develop as an independent discipline (Leavy, 2003). The competitive positioning approach is associated with Porter's seminal work on generic strategies and competitive advantage. The key to strategy formulation is coping with industry competition (de Wit and Meyer, 2010; Porter, 1980, 1985). Strategy is at the very core of general management, defining the firm's position and creating a good fit among activities by making trade-offs (Porter, 1996). Competitive positioning is an analytical process emphasizing external conditions of industry, competition and customer needs. In principal, two questions must be asked:

- (1) "Where will the firm compete", which refers to the target market?
- (2) "How will the firm compete", which refers to a differential advantage (Attia and Hooley, 2007, p. 92).

Other perspectives (such as learning, culture or power) emphasizing internal aspects of strategy balance strategic management of competitive positions (Mintzberg et al., 2009). Competitive positioning decisions can find a match between market needs and company resources serving those needs (Grant, 1997; Hooley et al., 1998). Combining the competitive positioning literature (a primarily external perspective) with the firm's resource-based view (a primarily internal perspective) helps identify critical resources to attain certain competitive positions (Attia and Hooley, 2007; Hooley and Greenley, 2005).

2.4 Principal conceptualizations and applications

The literature review identifies the main conceptualizations and applications of the positioning concept. In the marketing-management context, it is normally discussed in relation to segmentation, targeting and communication. The primary perspective is outside-in, referring to market-driven strategy (Jaworski et al., 2000; Louro and Cunha, 2001). In brand-management terms, the discussion traditionally revolves around selecting, implementing and controlling brand image over time. More recent research studies in that context emphasize the relationship between brand identity and brand position. Finally, the strategic-management perspective elevates positioning to the status of a general managerial concern related to achieving sustained competitive advantage by positioning a firm within its industry sector and/or on the basis of its internal resources and capabilities. The inside-out resource-based view of the firm, with its focus on skills, knowledge, processes, relationships or outputs, has increasingly come to influence the strategic-management field (de Wit and Meyer, 2010).

Following the overview of principal conceptualizations and applications of positioning in marketing, branding and strategy, we identify two approaches to understand positioning. These depend on whether positioning is seen from an outside-in (market orientation) or an inside-out (brand orientation) perspective. This distinction is relevant in relation to how an intended position is defined, and how the positioning process is implemented.

3. Market- and brand-oriented positioning

An organization's approach to its marketplace, brand resources and strategy may, to varying degrees be market- and/or brand oriented (Ewing and Napoli, 2005; Gyrd-Jones et al., 2013; Gromark and Melin, 2011; Reid et al., 2005; Urde et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2013; Wong and Merrilees, 2007). Balancing these two synergistic approaches is a theoretical and managerial challenge. The mindset of a particular organization will reflect the conceptualization of its brands, their fundamental functions and how they are managed and presented to their marketplace (Baumgarth et al., 2013). The quintessential brand- vs market-orientation question delineates two paradigms in managing its brand(s):

- (1) To what extent should an organization be guided by its identity?
- (2) To what extent should it be responsive to others' views and wishes?

We extend this question to discussing the positioning concept.

In positioning its brand(s), to what extent should an organization be guided by its identity? To what extent should it respond to others' views and wishes?

The foundation of *market orientation* satisfies the needs and wants of customer and non-customer stakeholders (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Shapiro, 1988; Venkatesan and Kumar, 2004). Brand image is key and defined from the outside-in. In other words, the organization responds to needs and wants in its market.

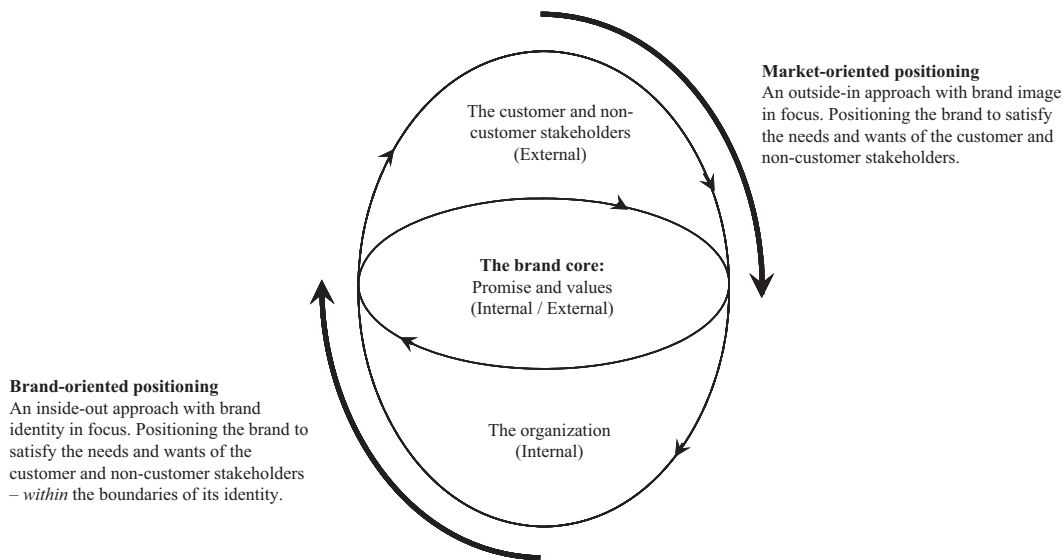
In *brand orientation*, satisfying the needs and wants of the customer and non-customer stakeholders occurs within the boundaries of the brand's identity. The clarity of the brand identity is key and defined from the inside-out. Brand orientation is defined as:

[...] an approach in which the processes of the organization revolve around the creation, development, and protection of brand identity in an on-going interaction with target customers [and non-customer stakeholders] with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantages in the form of brands (Urde, 1999, p. 117).

In essence, market orientation (outside-in) and brand orientation (inside-out) represent different points of departure in understanding, defining and managing brands. These two paradigms apply to different types of organizations (such as commercial corporations, nonprofit organizations, or institutions), brand structures (such as house of brands or branded house) and brands (such as product, place or corporate). We propose that the paradigmatic approach also influences the definition of the brand's position. Following the same line of reasoning, the choice of paradigm also influences the positioning process (relevant to different types of organizations and brand structures and brands). Figure 1 schematically depicts market- and brand-oriented positioning.

Figure 1 illustrates the continuous interaction between the organization (internal), the brand (internal/external) and customer and non-customer stakeholders (external). The two bold arrows represent the two approaches. In market-oriented positioning (arrow to the right), the customer and non-customer stakeholders are essential in forming and positioning the brand. The focus is an outside-in perspective and the image. However, in brand-oriented positioning (arrow to the left), the inside-out perspective is more important. The

Figure 1 Approaches to positioning (Urde et al., 2011)



Source: cf. Urde et al. (2011)

organizational identity and its value foundation is part of the brand identity. The response to the marketplace is not unconditional (Urde, 1999, p. 130), but is influenced by the boundaries set by the brand's core identity. With such an approach, an organization may choose *not* to opt for a certain position with reference to its brand's identity. Similarly, it may purposely strive for a position in the marketplace that matches its essence. Market-oriented and brand-oriented positioning is part of a new terminology and an alternative way to categorizing existing contributions from a positioning research perspective.

3.1 Market-oriented positioning

Market-oriented positioning is an outside-in approach that defines and implements an intended position with brand image as its point of departure and continuing frame of reference. The brand image, as perceived by customers and non-customer stakeholders, is the focus of this positioning approach.

For example, Kotler et al. (2009, p. 361) build on Ries and Trout's work to define positioning as the "act of designing the company's offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the minds of the target market". Kotler asserts that positioning results in "the successful creation of a customer-focused value proposition, a cogent reason why the target market should buy the product". Kotler's definition is a prime example of market-oriented positioning. Keller's (1999, p. 44) definition of the concept is also market-oriented: "Brand positioning is all about creating the optimal location in the minds of existing and potential customers so that they think of the brand in the 'right way'".

3.2 Brand-oriented positioning

Brand-oriented positioning is an inside-out approach that defines and implements an intended position with brand identity as its point of departure and continuing frame of reference. This implies that satisfying customers' needs and

wants occurs within the boundaries of the brand's core identity, influenced by the organization's mission, vision and values.

For example, Kapferer (2012) views identity as crucial in understanding a brand's *raison d'être* and inner values, while positioning provides the necessary focus on brand communication. Kapferer's emphasis on brand identity as a basis and guide for positioning encapsulates what we refer to as *brand-oriented positioning*. Aaker's (1996, p. 176) definition reflects the brand-oriented logic that positioning follows identity: "The part of the brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience and that demonstrates an advantage over competing brands". Brand identity is a rich construct to understand and build brands compared to purely focusing on positioning (de Chernatony, 1999). In our view, de Chernatony's approach to positioning is brand-oriented, while it is clear that he acknowledges the need to respond to others' views and wishes in managing brands. Table I contrasts market- and brand-oriented positioning regarding point of departure, approach, key concept, prominence and strategic focus.

To conclude the discussion on market and brand orientation, we emphasize that these approaches are different but synergistic. "There is in fact no inevitable tug-of-war" between the two paradigms (Urde et al., 2011, p. 17). An organization's approach can be brand-oriented or market-oriented, but will more realistically be a combination of the two paradigms. This is also the case for market- and brand-oriented positioning. The next section explores different schools of positioning.

4. Schools of thought

Based on the positioning literature, we distinguish five schools of thought. We characterize each school by a metaphor ("a figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but

Table I Market- vs brand-oriented positioning

	Market-oriented positioning	Brand-oriented positioning
Point of departure	External market demand and industry structure	Internal strength-driven brand potential
Approach	Outside-in	Inside-out
Key concept	Image	Identity
Prominence	Market (customer) over resources (brand)	Resources (brand) over market (customer)
Strategic focus	Positioning the brand to satisfy the needs and wants of the customer and non-customer stakeholders	Positioning the brand to satisfy the needs and wants of the customer and non-customer stakeholders – <i>within</i> the boundaries of its identity

analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable”: *Oxford English Dictionary*). Metaphors are powerful because they “extend our knowledge about the unknown by using the already known” (Stålhammar, 1997, p. 10). We link the notion of games (known) to the categorization of different schools of positioning (unknown). In research, metaphors play an important role in refining knowledge by stimulating creativity and vitality (Davies and Chun, 2003; Hunt and Menon, 1995; MacInnis, 2011; Morgan, 2006; Stern, 2006; Tsoukas, 1991). We provide case examples, drawn from our past and current empirical research studies and the general literature, to illustrate each positioning metaphor with an application in practice.

4.1 Positioning as a puzzle

By analyzing a market, its segments and the target customers’ unmet needs and wants, a brand can be positioned to fit a particular demand. In essence, this challenge is solving a *puzzle*; fitting the pieces together in such a way so as to see the full picture or pattern. Puzzle-solving methods disclose vital market patterns to analyze and optimize product positioning (Smith and Lusch, 1976; Johar and Sirgy, 1989; Wind, 1990; Chintagunta, 1994; Pham and Muthukrishnan, 2002; Gwin and Gwin, 2003). Such methods identify not only the perceived position of a particular brand and its competitors in markets’ perceptual space but also stakeholders’ views of ideal brand characteristics (Aaker and Shansby, 1982; Aaker, 2009; Esch, 2010). For example, conjoint analysis or multi-dimensional scaling are effective techniques to identify perceptions of how competitive offers differ on pre-determined attributes and value propositions (Arora, 2006; Burke, 2011; Ghosh and Chakraborty, 2004; Green *et al.*, 2001). Statistical analysis can construct perceptual maps generated from customers’ and non-customer stakeholders’ perceptions (Carroll and Green, 1997; Green and Krieger, 1992; Keller, 2012), which can reveal alternative dimensions and unoccupied gaps in perceptual space (Gensch and Javalgi, 1988).

Doro, a Swedish cell phone brand seeking to reposition its brand due to fierce industry competition, is one case of positioning strategy as a puzzle. Extensive market and consumer research was applied to constructing positioning charts and perceptual maps, which demonstrated that senior citizens were an underserved market segment. Doro developed a new product design for that market niche, with fewer functions and features, larger displays and buttons instead of touch screens. The positioning objective was to identify and exploit unmet customer needs and wants.

4.2 Positioning as wordplay

In the current context, *wordplay* defines rhetorical techniques used to position a brand and simultaneously de-position competing brands. As Ries and Trout (1986, p. 2) explain:

Positioning is not what you do to a product. Positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect. That is, you position the product in the mind of the prospect.

Ries and Trout (2001, p. 178) argue that achieving this was a strategic priority in an over-communicated society. They call for an oversimplified message to “cut through the advertising noise”. Influenced by Ries and Trout, advertising in the 1970s and 1980s was generally conceptualized as positioning (Pollay, 1985). In academic research, an important aspect of a brand’s position is the degree of similarity or difference in a given product or service category (Keller, 2012). A key point is linguistically defining and communicating product attributes that are not price-related (Kalra and Goodstein, 1998). To achieve certain customer associations, brand characteristics *vis-à-vis* competition and category levels can be emphasized to position the brand (Pechmann and Ratneshwar, 1991; Alden *et al.*, 1999; Punj and Moon, 2002).

Coca-Cola and Pepsi Cola are cases of positioning via wordplay. According to Kapferer (2012), Coca-Cola’s strategy is to reinforce its top-of-mind status, a key competitive advantage in the low-involvement, impulse-buying and soft-drink product category. Pepsi challenges the entrenched leader, primarily in terms of taste and image. Both companies follow a similar brand and business model that stresses the relevance and positioning of the brand. Thus, Coke lays claim to being “the real thing”, and Pepsi seeks to position itself as “the choice of the young generation”. Although specific brand slogans change, the rhetoric remains stable in both strategies. The positioning objective in this case is to be top in consumers’ minds and de-position a key rival.

4.3 Positioning as chess

Porter (1996, p. 62) defines strategic positioning as “performing different activities from rivals” or “performing similar activities in different ways”, which recalls the tactics of *chess*: diligent analysis, thorough planning and strategic execution. Thus, trading-off between strategies and creating a fit among activities are core tasks for general management in defining a company’s position. Evaluating the competitive situation and forces in the industry (Porter, 1980, 1985), and combining resources available with which to compete (Attia and Hooley, 2007; Hooley and Saunders, 1993; Hooley *et al.*, 1998, 2008), are central to the notion of strategic positioning. Porter strongly emphasizes competitive positioning as a

leading outside-in strategy, treating the development of firm resources as a derivative activity (de Wit and Meyer, 2010, p. 261). In contrast, the core-competence perspective pioneered by Prahalad and Hamel (1990) advocates an inside-out approach that “begins by assessing which distinctive competences we [the organization] want to build, and then considers the market opportunities that would exploit them best” (Leavy, 2003, p. 31). In the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991), the two fundamental assumptions are *resource heterogeneity* (firms have different resources) and *resource immobility* (resources cannot be easily transferred to, or copied by, other firms). Brands as resources can be a sustainable competitive advantage if they are characterized by “value, rarity, durability, inappropriability, imperfect imitability, and imperfect substitutability” (Balmer and Gray, 2003, p. 991).

The recent positioning of Electrolux, Europe’s largest manufacturer of white goods (such as refrigerators and washing machines), can be interpreted as a game of chess. After reviewing its strategic position and brand portfolio in 2001, the company implemented a 10-year brand policy. It focused on the Electrolux corporate brand and a range of fewer, but stronger individual brands (such as ZANUSSI and AEG) with consistent international positions. The positioning process involved an evolution from a manufacturing and product focus to a brand- and market-oriented approach. Brand resources, brand identity, customer insight and segmentation studies were key elements. The positioning objective was to achieve a fit between the business and brand strategies for long-term market relevance and differentiation of its brands.

4.4 Positioning as dominoes

The game of *dominoes* involves matching values in order to build a “line” of linked values. It is played with dominoes (oblong tiles marked with between zero and six spots on each half) that are laid down in a line. Each player must lay down a domino with a value that matches the value on the adjacent domino. Analogous to this idea, matching values is the essential logic of the “domino school of positioning”. A brand’s identity and track record (the values and promises that are internally rooted and externally perceived and appreciated by customers and non-customer stakeholders) represents its competitive strength and position in the market (de Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Riezebos and van der Grinten, 2011; Urde, 2003, 2009). Identity is in focus when leveraging brand equity and value creation (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991; Raggio and Leone, 2007). Examples of brands that match their brand values with the position are Volvo (*safety*), Nordstrom (*service*), Rolex (*prestige*), Miele (*quality*) and Google (*innovation*). Core values (Collins and Porras, 2004; Lencioni, 2002), brand heritage (Urde *et al.*, 2007) and authenticity (Beverland, 2005) are examples of essential characteristics that are matched with the selection of an identity-based position and in the continuous positioning process.

As a case in point, the Volvo Cars brand has positioned itself in association with “safety” from the very beginning. The organization’s internal values, the brand’s core values (“quality”, “care for the environment” and “safety”) and

promise (“For Life”), along with the externally communicated customer values, are matched in a manner similar to a game of dominoes. Volvo’s safety position is derived from its mission statement, which dates back to when the corporation was founded: “Cars are driven by people. The guiding principle behind everything we make at Volvo, therefore, is – and must remain – safety” (Volvo Brand Book, 2010, p. 35). For example, the introduction of the seat belt as a standard feature was *not* a customer-driven move, but something that Volvo implemented based on its own convictions. During an interview with us, Hans-Olov Olsson (Volvo Cars’ CEO from 2000 to 2005) recalled that “safety was controversial and seat belts were ridiculed when first introduced. An organization must fight for its values”. The safety value has been strongly supported by Volvo’s track record of “firsts” in relevant product developments. In Volvo’s own words:

[. . .] safety is and will remain the most distinguishing core value of Volvo. Safety is historically an integral part of Volvo products, processes and services and the basis of its positioning strategy. Today, the differentiating basis of the safety concept has evolved to further encompass personal, family, business and environmental values (Volvo Brand Policy, 1998, pp. 17, 22-23).

4.5 Positioning as wild-card poker

Wild cards are sometimes introduced to a deck of cards to liven up a game. These wild cards count as any card, thus increasing the probability of making a high-scoring hand. This game stands for creating uncontested market space and making the competition irrelevant. It is the objective of the blue-ocean strategy for which Kim and Mauborgne (2005) advocate. It pictures a total market as consisting of red and blue oceans. In the red ocean, industry boundaries are defined and accepted, and the competitive rules of the game are known. In the blue oceans, untapped spaces and positions await exploitation. The aim is to avoid head-to-head competition by navigating into uncharted, uncontested waters, rather than those reddened by competitors’ blood. Breaking established rules can create differentiated positions. Similarly, Hamel (1996) argues that companies must be unpredictable, so as to wrong-foot the competition, and not simply play by the rules of the game. Dru (1996) advocates “disruption” as a strategy for overturning conventions in the marketplace, while Holt and Cameron (2010) suggest “cultural innovation” as the catalyst to unlock markets.

The Swedish vitamin-enriched mineral water brand Vitamin Well illustrates playing a wild card in developing a positioning strategy. Introduced to the Scandinavian market in 2008, it disrupted existing product categorization by creating a new category that occupied a space between bottled water and carbonated soft drinks. The main challenge was achieving listing by leading retailers. After discussions with Nielsen Market Research, the new category was named *vitamin drinks* and continuous data tracking was instituted. Vitamin Well became the market leader by default, rather than an insignificant brand in a broad category. The positioning objective in this case was to find new, untapped spaces in the market and bypass competition. Today, Vitamin Well competes with Coca-Cola’s Vitamin Water brand. Holt and Cameron (2010) describe Vitamin Water’s positioning strategy as “breaking out of the functional benefit trap” and instead appealing to media-generated myths such as “a

vitamin a day” and “bottled-water hydration”. Vitamin Water applies wild-card poker positioning on a global scale.

Table II presents the five distinct schools of positioning, the objectives with which they are associated and the typical techniques and concepts used in their application. Each positioning metaphor is located on a continuum of market- vs brand-oriented positioning. The table also summarizes the five illustrative case examples and suggests three key readings for each school of positioning.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Since positioning was introduced as a marketing concept more than 50 years ago, it has been adopted and further developed by academics and practitioners. In the early days, it was employed mainly as a communication tool for branding fast-moving consumer goods. Today, positioning strategy is discussed and implemented in different industries (business-to-business and business-to-consumer) for all kinds of brands (including corporate, places or people). It has evolved from an advertising concept to a management concept. In revising the concept of positioning, we identify a pivotal question:

- To what extent should an organization be guided by its identity in positioning its brand(s)?
- To what extent should it be responsive to others' views and wishes?

The answer to this quintessential positioning question divides both academics and practitioners. The question can be traced to the paradox that all organizations must consider market developments, while also building and protecting their brand-resources (de Wit and Meyer, 2010). With the new terminologies of *market-oriented positioning* and *brand-oriented positioning* (Figure 1; Table I), we identify two fundamental approaches (derived from the broader discussion in the literature about these paradigms). We do not think that these two positioning approaches are an either/or proposition (Urde et al., 2011). In fact, they are synergistic, and there is a spectrum of hybrid versions. However, how an organization selects and executes its positioning strategy will imply a particular approach along the market- and brand-orientation spectrum (Table II). We believe that these strategic choices may be more or less conscious and suggest adherence to one or more of the defined schools of positioning. We return to the case examples to discuss how different positioning approaches were implemented.

In the Doro case, the *puzzle* to be solved was how to find and fit a new piece into an almost complete market picture, so a market-oriented approach to positioning was the logical choice. Coca-Cola and Pepsi's long-standing game of *wordplay* illustrates market- and brand-oriented positioning, fought with the help of advertising slogans to enhance the company's own brand, while simultaneously de-positioning the competitor. The Electrolux case illustrates how brand- and market-oriented positioning balances in a game of *chess* to find a fit between business and brand strategy. Volvo, on the other hand, relies on the value foundation and the brand track record with respect in particular to safety. We picture this as matching values in a game of *domino* signaling a strongly brand-oriented approach. For the entrepreneurial company

launching the then-unique Vitamin Well brand, *wild-card poker* proved to be a successful approach to positioning, combining brand and market orientation. The decision to take a certain perspective on positioning is conditioned by the nature of the brand (product or corporate), its market (consumer or industrial) and the phase (introduction or fortification). It, therefore, must be regularly reviewed and re-orchestrated. For instance, when Vitamin Well (a consumer product brand) subsequently faced fierce competition from a Coca-Cola brand, it shifted its positioning strategy from wild-card poker (introduction) to chess and wordplay (fortification). Similarly, Volvo Cars' most distinctive safety value, the basis of its brand-oriented domino game, needed to be developed over time. Brand management saw the need to supplement Volvo Cars' positioning strategy with a game of puzzles and wordplay to respond to its customers' evolving needs for more excitement and improved esthetics (Urde et al., 2011). Positioning a brand over time requires decisions regarding which elements of brand identity to keep and which ones to change (da Silveira et al., 2013).

This paper revises the concept of positioning to differentiate between fundamental approaches and chart a scheme of schools of positioning. We argue for the relevance of reflecting upon how positioning is approached, understood and applied. This consideration is important, both for individual managers and organizations. It is a question of prominence: market (customer) over resources (brand) vs resources (brand) over market (customer). Positioning ultimately must be managed over time, and an organization needs to carefully design its positioning strategy. This entails selecting and/or combining different schools of positioning (Table II), as the brief case examples illustrate.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study offers three main contributions to the positioning literature. First, it revises the positioning literature by suggesting an alternative way to categorizing existing contributions from the research area: market- and brand-oriented positioning. A theoretical implication is that positioning is understood not only from the predominant market-oriented (outside-in) but also from a brand-oriented (inside-out) perspective. This adds to the discussion of the two fundamental paradigms (Baumgarth et al., 2013) and the question of finding a balance between an outside-in and an inside-out approach in strategic management (de Wit and Meyer, 2010).

Second, we identify five schools of positioning and separate them along the spectrum of market orientation and brand orientation. The residing assumption that positioning is primarily about “mind-share”, as proclaimed by Ries and Trout (1986), is placed in perspective. Furthermore, a concept such as “blue ocean strategy” (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005) is redefined as part of positioning theory. The distinction and recognition of different schools of positioning provides new perspectives of the concept in its research areas. Using metaphors to describe the distinct positioning schools offers an essential categorization and provides clarity in theoretical discussions.

Third, the two approaches and the five schools of positioning offer a comprehensive overview of the literature

Table II Five schools of positioning

	Market-oriented positioning (outside-in)		Brand-oriented positioning (inside-out)	
SD Approach				
Positioning metaphor	Puzzle Finding lacking pieces in the market puzzle and matching them with existing ones	Wordplay Exploiting the meaning of words to reach desired brand associations	Wild Card Poker Identifying and creating uncontested market space by creativity and innovation!	Chess Strategizing to create fit with competition, market demand and company resources and capabilities!
Objective	Optimization: to identify and exploit unmet customer needs and wants	Communication: to find mental space to position the brand's message in the minds of customers	Innovation: to find new, untapped, market space and bypass competition	Coordination: to find a fit between the business strategy and the brand strategy
Typical techniques and concepts!	Image Pattern matching Perceptual mapping Gap spotting	Cognitive psychology Customer insights Advertising effectiveness Rhetoric	Economics! Socio cultural studies! Innovation! Cultural myth!	Identity Brand values Track record Authenticity
Key readings!!	Carroll and Green (1997) Green et al. (2001) Wind (1990)	Keller (2012)!! Ries and Trout (1986) Rossiter and Percy (1997)	Holt and Cameron (2005) Kim and Mauborgne (2005) Porter (1996)	De Chernatony (2010) Kapferer (2012) Riezebos and van der Grinten (2011)
Case	Doro: Extensive market and consumer research revealed senior citizens specific needs as an under served, small but growing market segment for mobile phones. Coca	Cola-Cola: The real thing campaign, implying something less positive about the main competitor Pepsi, in turn arguing to be the choice of the young generation	Vitamin Well: The combination of mineral water and vitamins broke the existing product categorization and gave birth to a new category: Vitamin enriched water	Volvo Cars: The safety position is based on the mission, the internally rooted core values and identity; a track record of safety features and innovation

(marketing, branding and strategy) on positioning. To date, this has been lacking in the positioning literature. The introduction of this paper argues that the positioning concept is in peril due to its many meanings, applications and overall vagueness. With the conceptual aid of the proposed scheme of five distinct schools of positioning, this paper provides an applicable framework to support, guide and synergistically manage a brand's identity and image within an overall business and brand strategy. It complements the brand-image concept framework by Park *et al.* (1986) by encompassing both an outside-in and an inside-out perspective.

5.2 Managerial implications

Three main practical implications emerge from the study. First, the choice of a particular school of positioning implies a paradigm (market or brand orientation). In principle, this choice depends on the answers to two questions:

- (1) How the intended position is defined?
- (2) How the process of positioning is implemented?

The market- and brand-oriented schools of positioning invite a wide array of managers, internal and external to an organization, to reflect on their approaches to positioning. For example, CEOs, senior managers, marketing directors, brand managers, marketing communication managers and brand consultants could all ask themselves about their positioning approach. Ultimately, this question is about prioritizing market (customers) before (brand) resources or (brand) resources before market (customers). General management needs to find a balance between these two perspectives, but also in relation to positioning. It is essential for the management team to build a common understanding and agreement regarding such fundamental positioning process questions.

Second, the new terminology of market- and brand-oriented positioning and the five metaphors offers practitioners a guide to select a school of positioning based on the positioning objective. If the objective is to find unmet customer needs and wants, this would indicate the positioning as a puzzle (market-oriented approach), while the objective to fortify market positions based on identity and track record would point toward positioning as domino (brand-oriented approach). A first question for a management team with responsibility for positioning strategy might, therefore, be: "Which metaphor best captures our current positioning?" The answer could be evaluated, debated and possibly compared with competitors' chosen approaches. One outcome of a more in-depth conversation about positioning strategy might be the logical sequencing of the options through the stages of a brand's evolution. The value of the proposed game metaphors lies in their potential to mitigate frustrating, confusing discussions about implementing positioning.

Third, different schools of positioning, or combinations thereof, might apply over time. Strongly market-oriented positioning might be complemented by a degree of brand-oriented positioning, or vice versa. A brand-oriented manager might want to shift perspective and prioritize analyzing the environment and customer needs for identifying attractive market opportunities. The firm's resource base might turn out *not* to be the given starting point for determining the positioning strategy, "but should merely be

acknowledged as a potentially limiting condition on the firm's ability to implement the best business strategy" (de Wit and Meyer, 2010, p. 256). Likewise, market-oriented managers might instead prioritize internal strength over external opportunities in building positioning strategies: "Once the long-term direction for the building of the resource structure has been set, attention can be turned to identifying market opportunities where these specific strengths can be exploited" (de Wit and Meyer, 2010, p. 257). Shifting perspectives is not merely an intellectual exercise but also an intelligent way to explore opportunities and/or confirm an established positioning approach.

5.3 Future research

Further empirical case-based research might investigate when, which, and how different positioning schools apply in practice. The brief cases in this paper indicate a dynamic over time regarding applying the market- and brand-oriented schools of positioning. An in-depth theoretical and practical investigation of the dynamics of positioning would be valuable for the research field. Longitudinal case studies could provide relevant insights into positioning processes in different contexts (such as business-to-business) and competitive situations (such as international marketing). Furthermore, studies of positioning in different brand architectures can provide valuable insights into the strategic management of brand portfolios. As noted, but not explored in detail, product brand positioning primarily concerning fast-moving consumer goods and their advertising have received the most attention and dominated research practice. Investigating the positioning processes of corporate brands is highly relevant, both from theoretical and business practice perspectives.

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