How Positioning Can Help Boost Your Neurology Practice and Drive Business Success

BY CHRIS BEVOLO

At capacity, but need to improve your case mix? Want more self-referred consumer business? Or to increase your ability to build the right practice with the right patients? Positioning can help you achieve these goals and more.

Positioning is a proven method for distinguishing a business in its market. Well-positioned medical practices reliably attract and retain the best, most profitable patients. This article will help you understand positioning, how you can explore and evaluate strong position options, and the first steps you can take in building your own strong market position.

THE THEORY OF POSITIONING Today, consumers are bombarded with more than 3,000 marketing messages a day, and that number is on the rise. Yet the average person is only able to absorb 100 of those messages.¹ That calculation is the crux of a fundamental problem facing all businesses: How do you differentiate your offering and attract the customers that are best for you? Physician practices are no different, and whether we consider consumer or referring physician audiences, positioning can empower you to break through and build your desired patient base.

Positioning was first postulated in the 1970s by Al Ries and Jack Trout, pioneers in the use of branding in modern advertising and marketing. The theory behind positioning is that consumers are bombarded with thousands of messages every day, from hundreds of business categories and industries, and thousands of

products and services. There is no way to process it all, so consumers subconsciously filter and prioritize those that they trust, those that are familiar, and those that are prevalent. Positioning is a strategy whereby a business focuses on a single core aspect of its offering to establish a unique brand in a market. For example, Domino's Pizza was built on a position based on fast delivery (as opposed to a position around the quality or taste of the pizza). Volvo is known as the safe automotive choice (as opposed to the most stylish or least expensive).

Establishing a clear, differentiated position in a market can be a huge competitive advantage for an organization, because it makes it much easier and less expensive to attract desired customers. For example, those car shoppers who prioritize safety in their auto purchases are likely to always consider a Volvo model among their top choices.

POSITIONING AND PHYSICIAN GROUPS Kriss Barlow, partner at Barlow/McCarthy, a nationally recognized consulting firm, and author of *A Marketer's Guide to Physician Relations*,² has worked with dozens of physician practices, including several neurology practices, over the past 12 years. She says positioning can have a significant impact on the long-term success of a physician group. The benefit of positioning, she says, is that by not trying to be all things to all people, neurologists can gain more control over the type of practice they want to build.

"For many physicians, positioning is used to help build differentiation in a competitive market, for either defending or growing market share," says Barlow. "While positioning can help neurologists in the same way, many neurology practices are at capacity. For them, it becomes a way to shape their patient mix in their preferred way. Positioning can put them in the driver's seat."

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“There are three important components to understand when considering a potential position for your practice: your market, your competition, and your vision”

There are many different types of market positions available to neurology practices. For example, a practice may focus on a certain specialty, such as memory loss or spinal cord injury. An organization could build a position around the expertise or experience of its physicians, using industry leadership, years of practice, or national recognition to support the position. Practices who target self-referred patients might consider convenience or customer service as a differentiating position. According to Barlow, it helps to prioritize which audience is most important to you and your practice—consumers or referring physicians sources (e.g., hospitals, systems, accountable care organizations, multispecialty groups)—when considering a position. Most of all, it is important to understand that a position must fit with the essence of the practice.

“When you choose a position, you have to live that strategy, not just talk about it,” says Barlow.”

CHOOSING A POSITION Exploring and selecting a position for your practice is a strategic endeavor that should not be taken lightly. Once you have selected a desired position, you will need to commit your leadership and resources to bringing that position to life, and it can be painful and expensive to shift gears or abandon your strategy later. When exploring posi-

tioning, consider bringing in a consultant to help your practice explore and prioritize your options. A consultant can contribute a proven process for positioning, which will bring order and experience to your effort. He or she will also lend an outside, objective voice to the conversation, helping to keep you and your partners honest in your assessment of potential positioning options.

There are 3 important components to understand when considering a potential position for your practice: your market, your competition, and your vision. Consider each component as a circle—the best position for your practice is likely where all 3 circles intersect (figure).

Your market. What market are you serving? Is your goal local, regional, or national? Are you focusing on self-referred consumers, referring physicians, or both? What is the demographic and psychographic makeup of your audiences? What are the population trends that will impact your market? What are the current and future needs of your targeted audiences? To understand your market, you will need access to data such as consumer research, market share, and referral patterns. While data will give you a foundation of understanding, it will be up to you (and your consultant) to analyze and interpret the information, and eventually make decisions based on your understanding of the research.

Your competition. Who is your competition? Are you worried about them? Are any other groups in your defined market pursuing positions you are considering? Are they further along the path to owning a position in your market? The best positions are those that clearly differentiate you from the other options in the market. To learn which positions other neurology practices are pursuing (if any), conduct a competitive analysis. Review their Web sites and look for recurring themes or points of emphasis. Consider their reputations in the medical community, and ask peers about their opinions of other groups. Patient focus groups or surveys can help you better understand the consumer perspective of the competition.

Your vision. No matter the positions available in your desired market, or the opportunities left open by your competition, your top priority when selecting a position is that it fits with your vision for your practice. Given that many neurology practices have more patients than they can handle, pursuing positioning is less about surviving as a business, and more about choosing the future that most suits you and your partners. So before you begin the positioning process, make sure you un-

Figure Finding the best position for your practice

derstand what is important to your leadership, what drives them to succeed, and what brings them the most joy out of their practice.

EVALUATING A SUCCESSFUL POSITION How do you know which position is best for your practice? Once you have identified the potential positioning options available, review them against these 6 criteria, outlined in *A Marketer's Guide To Brand Strategy*³:

1. Customer need: How well does the position address a core customer need? This is where prioritizing your top audience—consumer or referring physician—will come into play. For example, a position based on customer service or convenience may resonate more with consumers than with physicians.
2. Reality: How well does your position reflect reality? Your position will bring value only if you deliver against it—it does not matter what you say (in your marketing or communications), it matters what you do. A position may be aspirational, providing a guiding vision for how your organization wants to be valued by the market moving forward, but at some minimum level, it also must be grounded in reality. Perhaps the most damaging move an organization can make relative to positioning is to make a promise on which it cannot deliver.
3. Believability: Give careful consideration to how easy it will be to persuade the market you can deliver on your position. For example, a new practice might have a hard time supporting a position as the most experienced neurology offering in the market, even if there is truth to that claim. Clinical groups often want to claim that their people, or their clinical outcomes, are the best in the market. While this may be true, it is often hard to prove, and because many providers make those same claims, it is harder for audiences to believe such claims. That does not mean you should not pursue a position that is accurate just because it will not immediately be believable in your market. Just keep the right perspective on

the additional energy and resources it may take to get you there.

4. Sustainability: Will your position allow you to be successful financially over the long term? For example, Burger King was initially lauded for its groundbreaking and controversial advertising featuring the “king” mascot, which supported a shift in positioning to focus the fast-food chain on the young male market. That narrow market focus, however, helped lead to a drop in profits and sales, as the chain ignored other segments such as families.⁴ Also, consider how sustainable your position is from a market perspective: Will you still be able to support the position 10 years from now? Will competitors be able to easily match your positioning or surpass it? If you choose a position based on expertise, what would happen if one or more of your key physicians left?
5. Focus: The key to positioning success is focus. The simpler your position, the better. First, it is easier to connect with your targeted audience with one promise, rather than multiple claims. Second, having a clear focus allows you to prioritize your efforts around one aspect of your business, helping leadership make financial, service, and strategic decisions. Keep in mind, however, that while you need to focus your position around one aspect of your practice, that does not mean you can ignore other fundamental components of delivering care. No matter how great your customer service, if you do not deliver quality medical care, you will not succeed. The goal of positioning is to choose one direction to better differentiate your business and connect with desired audiences, but you still need to deliver on all aspects to a certain level to keep everyone happy.
6. Uniqueness: How unique is your position in your selected market? There are only so many ways you can distinguish your neurology practice, and in larger markets, there may be competitors who strive for the same position you have chosen. The key then is not just in the stated position—e.g., service, specialization, expertise—but how well and how consistently you deliver on it. Many retailers claim to have outstanding customer service, but Nordstrom's is typically named as the store with the best customer service, because they have been able to support that claim for so long, and because they deliver on that position consistently across their stores and in so many different aspects of their business.

Positioning Your Practice

- Distinguish your practice in the market.
- Focus on a single core aspect of your business.
- Gain more control over the type of practice you want to build.
- Commit leadership and resources to bringing that position to life.
- Avoid the pain and expense of shifting gears or abandoning strategy later.
- The simpler your position, the better.

MOVING FORWARD WITH YOUR POSITIONING

Once you have settled on a desired position, the long, hard work begins of leveraging that position. For starters, remember Barlow's key message: choosing a position means having to live it, not just talk about it. The first instinct may be to trumpet your position with consumer advertising or physician-oriented communications. For most organizations, however, it takes some time to build and enhance the desired position, initially making promotion a secondary priority. For example, if a practice wants to be positioned based on the convenience it offers patients, what can be done to enhance that claim? Can office hours be expanded? Locations added? Online scheduling offered? When it is time to promote your practice, communications should focus like a laser on your differentiated position and its supporting elements.

THE POWER OF POSITIONING Not all physician practices need a unique position to succeed, and not all positions will lead to success. But if you desire more

control over the patients you see, and more control over the future growth of your practice, positioning is a business strategy worth considering.

DISCLOSURE

Chris Bevolo is president and owner of Interval, Inc., a health care marketing firm that provides branding and positioning consulting services to hospitals, health systems, and other healthcare organizations, and receives publishing royalties for *A Marketer's Guide to Brand Strategy* (HealthLeaders Media, 2008) and *A Marketer's Guide to Measuring Results* (HealthLeaders Media, 2010).

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