

# Why a narrative approach will transform your brand's relationship with your audience



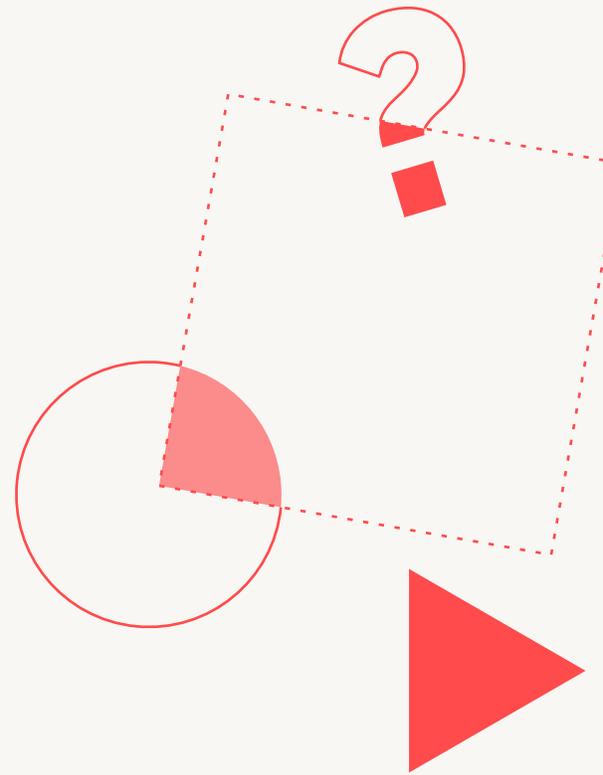
# The inherent – and absent – psychology behind brand positioning

“Positioning” was first coined by Jack Trout in 1969 in an article he wrote for *Industrial Magazine*. In it, Trout argued that positioning was how consumers simplified the overwhelming amount of information delivered to them through ads. More than a decade later, Al Ries and Jack Trout expanded Trout’s original concept into their groundbreaking first book, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, in which they define positioning as “an organized system for finding a window in the mind.”

This short phrase revealed an important truth about brand positioning: It is both a cartographic exercise and a psychological phenomenon. The cartography of positioning stems from the fact that the product must attempt to define its place in an environment in which there are competitive options. If the competitors are all gathered around one technology or benefit, the product must work to be located near another. Positioning is also a psychological exercise because this map exists entirely inside the minds of consumers.

Despite the duality of positioning, Al Ries, Jack Trout, and most marketers focus on the product and not the consumer. Take a look at the standard positioning template below:

For (target consumer), who (statement of the need or opportunity), (product name) is a (product category) that (statement of key benefit). Unlike (primary competitive alternative), our product (statement of primary differentiation).



Positioning statements such as these do a fantastic job at documenting needs, benefits, and reasons to believe, but they don't do very much at all to demonstrate why it's important. Consider this example using the Calgon line of bath products:

For moms, who sometimes need to escape the chaos of running a household, Calgon is a home spa product that has the essence of a romantic bouquet and the soothing power of aloe to leave your skin feeling soft, smooth, and conditioned. Unlike Vaseline Intensive Care bath products, our product includes a patented skin-silkening formula proven to improve the feel of your skin.

Other than the description of the audience (moms) and their need (to escape), the entire statement centers on the brand. It is a description of the product and why the owners of Calgon think it is so awesome. Producing a marketing program or campaign from a statement such as this won't focus very much on the consumer because the consumer is not the focus.

If you were to relate this to a relationship, it'd be a very self-absorbed, one-sided relationship (or at least a poorly written Match.com profile). Where traditional positioning excelled in describing the most important product benefits, it failed in meaningfully acknowledging the consumer or recognizing their psychology.

## If you want your brand to be top of mind, use psychology

There's one sure fire way to penetrate people's minds – narrative. Narrative psychology is concerned with the “storied nature of human conduct,” that is, how human beings deal with their life experiences by creating and sharing consumer narratives. In other words, stories are the language of the mind.

Stories, as most of us know them, are nothing new. The marketing industry is flush with story-based concepts and frameworks. Advertisers are trying to tell people stories. Salespeople open with stories about their products. Testimonials have consumers telling their own stories. But the field of narrative psychology describes something else that people do with stories. They think them.

People are as much story thinkers as they are storytellers. Narratives are a cognitive tool that people use to make sense of their decisions and inform their choices in the future. When we apply narrative psychology to branding, we realize that brands are part of those stories, too. Consumers integrate products, services, and brands into their lives using a narrative structure. Nike gives people the ability to create an athletic narrative. Volvo is part of many people’s narrative as safe and responsible parents. Nora Ephron once said, “If we don’t create our own stories, someone else will do it for us.” Without narrative psychology, we’re ceding control of our brand to every consumer who touches it. The story that gets created as a result may not be the story we want.

## Don’t map a position. Find your brand’s role in the consumer’s story.

In order to improve the way brands “find a window in the mind,” we have to rethink the way we think about positioning. Traditional positioning exercises focus on selling a product – not enhancing a consumer’s story. We want both. This is where Narrative Positioning excels.

### Traditional Positioning

Product-Centered

Developed by Focusing on the Product’s Attributes

- Who is the consumer target?
- What is the category?
- What does your product provide?
- Who are the competitors?
- What is the rational benefit?
- What is the emotional benefit?
- What are the reasons to believe?

### Narrative Positioning

Consumer-Oriented

Developed by Focusing on the Consumers’ Stories

- Who is the consumer target?
- What do you do for the consumer?
- How is the consumer transformed by what you do?
- What threatens the consumer’s transformation?

Narrative Positioning identifies the ideal consumer narrative and helps you find your place in it. It is built around the narrative model of catalyst, hero, transformation, and threat. Good narratives have each of these elements.

The catalyst of a narrative is the person, thing, or event that gets the action moving. In the movie *Independence Day*, starring Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum, the catalyst is the alien invasion. In this exercise, it's your brand.

The hero is the center of the story. Since we're developing a brand narrative that centers the consumer, the consumer is the center of this story. Will Smith's character was our hero in *Independence Day*.

The transformation is how the hero is changed by the events of the story. These changes are big or small, short or extended over time. The most engaging stories, however, have the most dramatic and emotional transformations. Jeff Goldblum's character, one of the other heroes in *Independence Day*, finds the courage to join Will Smith's character on the flight to defeat the alien invasion. In your business, your consumer may be transformed into a person with a greater sense of gratitude. Nike transforms ordinary people into athletes. Volvo transforms ordinary people into responsible parents. Defining this clearly is critical to success because it is the essence of your consumer's motivation for choosing you or your competitors.

Finally, threats are any elements in the story that might prevent your hero's transformation. It could be a competitive threat, an environmental threat, or even a personal one. Will Smith's and Jeff Goldblum's characters must each overcome personal and technical threats in order to be the heroes that (spoiler alert) ultimately defeat the alien invasion. In marketing, threats may be as simple as a lack of awareness or as complex as a pandemic. Regardless, it's important to document the threat as it will help define the needs or barriers your brand will need to address.

Now that we've reviewed the elements of a Narrative Positioning, let's take a look at how we might build one.



# Narrative Positioning

Ideally, you would work through this exercise with consumer insights revealed using an emotional research technique. In some cases, you may do both a traditional positioning (to figure out your product's key benefits) and a Narrative Positioning that builds the brand above it. In other cases, you can define your relationship with the consumer by just following these steps:



## 1. Who is the consumer target?

Much like traditional positioning, you need to define the consumer. This is the target with whom you most want to build a better relationship. We recommend choosing one audience at a time rather than trying to develop a positioning for everyone. So don't write down "anyone looking for shoes" or "donors, volunteers, and employees." If you have too many heroes, your story loses focus and becomes less meaningful and relevant to the audience that matters most to your brand's success.

**Write your answer here:**

## 2. What do you do for the consumer?

If this were a traditional positioning exercise, this would be what your product provides or your rational benefit. This should be the easiest question in this exercise. If you are a yoga instructor, you provide yoga lessons. If you're a travel agent, you organize vacations. As a social scientist, I know you're expecting us to get mushy and emotional (and we will), but now is not the time. Emotions are triggered by things that happen. Acknowledge that by first jotting down the very tangible, rational, real thing you do for your consumer.

**Write your answer here:**

### 3. How is the consumer transformed by what you do?

This is where you get emotional. While they may buy a product or service that fills a need, this is the reward for doing so. Donating to an organization may make them feel like they're honoring their grandfather. Taking a yoga lesson may make them feel like they're investing in themselves. Booking a vacation may make them feel like they're broadening their perspective on life.

**Write your first answer here:**

#### The 5-Why Technique

This exercise has an additional step to help you get at the heart of how the consumer may be transformed by your relationship. It's called the 5-Why Exercise – a questioning technique that originated in Japan with Sakichi Toyoda – the founder of Toyota Industries. The technique is based on the idea that if you ask "why" 5 times in succession, you will get to the root of the issue or question at hand. When working on a Narrative Positioning, I always recommend taking the first answer to the question above and pushing it deeper with a 5-Why Exercise. Why is it important to him to honor his grandfather with a donation? Why is it important to her to invest in herself with a yoga class? Why is it important to them to broaden their perspectives with a vacation? When you answer that question, ask a similar Why question about the response.

**Write your fifth answer here:**

### 4. What threatens the consumer's transformation?

These are the barriers or needs your consumer faces before he or she experiences the emotional transformation your brand might provide. In some cases, it helps to write them down in response to the transformations you may have brainstormed above. In other cases, these may already be familiar to you from your research in the space. For example, one threat consumers may face before joining a gym is a fear of stereotypical gym culture: muscle-bound athletes and supermodels working out with every hair perfectly styled.

**Write your answer here:**

When you've answered these questions, you'll have the components of a Narrative Positioning. To clarify what it all means, place your responses into the template on the following page (the prompts refer to questions above):

To enable (the most meaningful transformation) for (the hero) in the face of (threats), (Our Brand) (does some functional action) that (provides a series of transformations).

Now that we have identified the major elements to creating an emotional brand relationship, we begin to see the ways in which this might be summarized and ultimately tested. Here's one (of potentially many) examples for Calgon:

To help working moms avoid burnout from being a mom, partner, caregiver, and business owner in the face of clashing demands, responsibilities, and obligations, Calgon provides a collection of home spa products that makes it easy for Mom to escape, allows her to feel like she's not losing touch with her own desires, and enables a rejuvenating moment to connect with her inner self.

Now we're identifying the emotional window into the mind of Mom! The Narrative Positioning exercise provides a more audience-centric perspective for brands attempting to improve their relationships with consumers. It's effective because it's structured in the way people think – in narratives. Finally, it works because it finds a role for the brand in the consumer's story – and not the other way around. Statements such as these can be tested with consumers to find those that are most resonant and motivational.

To learn how Threadline can help you develop a Narrative Positioning and a more meaningful, relevant, and inspiring brand, contact us at [hello@threadline.co](mailto:hello@threadline.co).