

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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The One Statement That Brands You and Positions You

by Dr. Mike Armour

Years ago in the marketing world gave us the term USP. The letters stand for "Unique Selling Proposition."

I've never really cared for the term myself. But the term is now so widely accepted that I must occasionally accede to using it myself.

But in my judgment, the phrase "Unique Selling Proposition" is ill-chosen. I know very few people who want to be "sold." And even fewer who want to be "propositioned."

People are not interested in what you are selling. Your product or service has interest to them only to the degree that it fulfills a value that they find important. And the reason they choose you over your competition is because you fulfill that value in a unique way.

In their mind this unique distinctive is your brand, what you stand for. It's how they see you positioned against the backdrop of your competition. So I prefer to rearrange the letters and speak of your UPS — your Unique Positioning Statement — rather than a USP.

Your Personal UPS

Unique Positioning Statements are just as essential for individuals competing for jobs and promotions as they are for companies vying for customers. If you offer nothing unique compared to the competition, you are just another commodity.

One of my coaching colleagues constantly tells his clients that every day is a sales call, even if they are not in sales. Every day you are selling yourself to others as a person who has something valuable to offer. It's vital to keep your personal brand in good repair.

Now, for purposes of this article I want to focus on how to define a business UPS. The same principles, however, apply to developing your personal Unique Positioning Statement.

It Must Tie to Values

A cleverly-worded, easily-remembered UPS is advantageous. But cleverness is no substitute for tying your brand to one or more unique values that you offer. The starting

point for developing a UPS is the question, "What unique value(s) do I bring to my clients or customers?"

Moreover, it's the *customer's* values that count, not yours. What you value about your product or service may have little or no appeal to your customer. Your UPS and branding must be anchored to what customers perceive as personally valuable to them.

On the surface, to be sure, not all great UPSes sound like value statements. Take Avis' famous slogan, "We try harder." It says nothing overtly about values.

Yet this UPS is indeed tied to a value, even if the value is only implied. The slogan infers, "If you value attentive, quality customer service, we are your choice."

It May Tie to Multiple Values

It's sometimes advantageous to connect your UPS to multiple values. We've done that at Strategic Leadership Development International with our UPS: "Big Firm Quality without Big Firm Fees." Let me describe how this UPS evolved.

Early in the history of my company I learned that many executives did not know how to sort through the myriad of leadership development firms offering them services. But these executives assumed that coaches in large, well-known consulting firms were likely to be better qualified than those in smaller companies.

Ironically, several of these "well-known firms" were actually hiring us to fulfill their coaching contracts with clients. Typically these "big firms" paid us about 60% of what they were charging the customer for the coaching.

So we could charge 70% of the big-firm fee, offer the same suite of coaches, put more money in the coach's pocket, and save the customer money. A winning proposition for everyone (except the big firm).

Thus we tied together two customer values — quality service and affordability — into a single UPS: "Big Firm Quality without Big Firm Fees."

The second part of the UPS says to the customer, "We are competitive on price" without making the fatal mistake of building our UPS around being inexpensive. If you position yourself as the least expensive alternative (or one of the least expensive), you set yourself up to be underpriced and undercut. You've just branded yourself as a commodity, selling yourself entirely on price.

Yet, the cost factor for our services cannot be ignored. After all, even customers in huge corporations are cost conscious. So our UPS simply says, "We save you money over the same quality offered by the huge firms." We don't say that we are the cheapest around, or even in the bottom tier of pricing.

In fact, by comparing ourselves to the big firms, we imply that our services fall in an upper tier of pricing, which they do. The quality of our coaches justifies a higher fee. Our UPS thus discourages would-be clients who want to buy on price alone.

Your UPS May Not Be What You Think

In determining what your Unique Positioning Statement should be, ask your customers or clients why they have chosen to do business with you. Then listen carefully to their answers. Is there a recurring pattern in the responses they give?

Their responses often reveal that people are choosing you or your product for reasons completely removed from what you have assumed. Some of the best UPSes I've ever seen were actually lifted verbatim from a customer's comment when asked, "Why did you choose to do business with us?"

The rule of thumb is this: what motivates current customers to do business with you is likely to motivate other clients to choose you in the future. So listen carefully to customer feedback and fashion your UPS accordingly.

You Have One, Whether You've Stated It Or Not for Leaders

Just because you've never spelled out your business or personal Unique Positioning Statement does not mean that you don't have one. You've merely settled for letting your positioning be determined by default. You've allowed others to fashion their own sense of your positioning without you being intentional in shaping their perspective.

Once you become more purposeful in articulating your UPS, it becomes the pivot point around which you build marketing materials, web sites, sales presentations, and casual conversations about your business.

A well-crafted UPS is more than a mere slogan or tagline to describe your business. It is the anchor statement for all of your marketing efforts.

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