

Dick Maggione: Trout's seven 'Abouts' shape marketing strategy

By [Dick Maggione](#) Special to The Canton Repository

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Marketing strategy is first about finding your difference, then finding the best way to get your differentiating idea into the minds of your prospects and customers.

The explosion of choice for the consumer is the direct result of the explosion of competition. Finding your difference is an absolute must for survival.

Positioning pioneer Jack Trout wrote many books, completed positioning assignments with hundreds of brands and delivered many lectures. Based on his vast experience, he whittled his thinking down to seven key marketing strategies, which he called the "Abouts."

Trout's seven "Abouts" are:

1. Strategy is About Perceptions

Because positioning is about finding the best way to get your differentiating idea into the mind of your prospects and customers, we have to know a little about how the mind works. Here's a quick review of the four mind rules:

- Minds are limited. The mind rejects information that doesn't match up with what's already in the mind. That's why the first automobile was introduced as the "horseless carriage. Product categories are like ladders in our minds with each rung standing for a brand and its differentiated position.
- Minds are insecure. Minds tend to make decisions emotionally and then rationalize their decision. Pure logic does not win out. Insecurities or risks fall into several areas: monetary, functional, physical, social and psychological. This is why we like to follow the herd. Choosy mothers choose Jif. Tylenol, the pain reliever hospitals use most.
- Minds don't change. If your assignment is to change people's minds, don't accept the assignment.
- Minds lose focus. Loss of focus is about line extension. Line extensions can be a wonderful move. The extension, however, must be aligned with the position you already own in the mind. Campbell's can introduce as many mediocre-canned soups as it likes. But it can't extend into the premium-canned soup category. Progresso owns that.

Perception IS reality. Don't get confused by the facts.

2. Strategy is About Being Different

Being first is a differentiating idea. If you can't be first in a category, start a new category, a subcategory. Being first in a category is a big advantage. We believe if you are No. 1, you must know what you're doing.

The most common way to differentiate is with an attribute — a distinctive benefit.

There are many ways to differentiate, such as the way your product is made, a special ingredient, its heritage, its price (high or low), how it distributes its product and more.

In the toothpaste category, one brand fights cavities, another gives you fresh breath, one is for sensitive teeth, another is for gingivitis and yet another for whiter teeth and one with natural ingredients.

3. Strategy is About Competition

Strategic planning must consider the competition. It's about avoiding the competitors' strengths and exploiting their weaknesses. It's often about what the competition will let us do.

Marketing is like warfare. The leader in a category plays defense and must be willing to attack itself with new ideas and block competitive moves.

Nos. 2 or 3 in a category play offense and avoid the leader's strength. Instead, they find an inherent weakness in the leader's strength and attack at that point on as narrow a front as possible.

Smaller players in a category should flank, which involves avoiding the main battle by moving into an uncontested area.

4. Strategy is About Specialization

A brand can't be everything for everybody. It is better to be exceptional at one thing than good at many things. You become recognized as the expert. We extend more trust to the expert.

Specialization is one of the best ways to fight against the very big unfocused companies.

Positioning is about focus. Focus can make you bigger. Focus on a specialization is your differentiator — your position. But positioning is not completed until you get your [differentiator](#) into the minds of your prospects and customers.

5. Strategy is About Simplicity

Big ideas often come out of small words. Volvo and safety. Domino's and delivery. FedEx and overnight.

If something doesn't make sense to you, it's probably because it doesn't make sense — and there's a very good chance it won't make sense to your customers, either.

Instead of admiring complexity, search for the obvious. Common sense rules. Simple wins. A simple idea is easier to get into the mind of your customers and prospects. The simple idea is your differentiator.

6. Strategy is About Leadership

A little over a decade ago, I wrote a book, “The CEO’s Number One Responsibility: Identifying and Articulating Your Brand’s Position.” It’s even more true today. I would be pleased to email you a free digital copy.

It’s up to the leader of the organization to be sure it has a position and to be its most fervent cheerleader.

With market disruptions commonplace, the leader must be flexible, have mental courage and often be bold. The leader must champion where she or he wants to go.

7. Strategy is About Reality

You might have a very good differentiating idea that your competition doesn’t own and your customers love. But if you don’t have the money to get that idea into the minds of your prospects and customers, it’s not a good idea. At least, not for you. Ask Gablinger’s, the first “light” beer. They couldn’t get the money, so they lost, and Miller Lite won.

To win with your idea, you might have to reduce the size of the battleground by focusing on a tighter geography. Or you might need to consider further tightening the specialization of your product or service.

Another option is to target a particular industry such as medical vs. aviation or free-standing condos versus attached condos. Consider changing whom you are targeting at a prospect company, such as the engineer or the purchasing agent.

Reality dictates that you can’t do just what you want. It’s what your competition will let you do. It’s what your resources will allow you to do. It’s what your prospects and customers will allow into their minds. It’s what makes sense to the market.

Do you have the right idea?

If you’d like to dig deeper into marketing strategy’s seven “Abouts,” you will enjoy Jack Trout’s book, “Trout on Strategy, Capturing Mindshare. Conquering Markets.”

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