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Experiential positioning: strategic differentiation of customer-brand relationships

Abstract

Effective positioning helps firms attract new customers in the short run, and helps build customer-brand relationships in the long run. In addition, effective positioning by the set of firms in an industry essentially decreases direct competition and offers potential customers choices in the market. While researchers and practitioners alike acknowledge the importance of strategic positioning to the firm's success, current business trends and a lack of positioning research make executing an effective positioning strategy difficult for today's managers. This research revisits the concept of positioning, introducing experiential positioning as a strategic process in which firms differentiate themselves on the basis of different experience propositions. This approach is especially appropriate for mature industries or those industries that inherently lack obvious opportunities for differentiation based on the core product or service alone. To demonstrate our conceptual framework we analyze a large sample of TV advertisements from the online brokerage industry during the growth period of 1999-2000 to demonstrate how firms in this industry effectively created different options for customers when core differences were rather minor. We use archetype analysis and relationship theory to identify the basic forms of relationship experience available within the category of online trading, demonstrating the viability of our approach for positioning in similar market contexts.

Keywords: positioning, marketing strategy, service experience.

Introduction

Effective positioning by the key players in a category actually decreases direct competition by avoiding the commodity trap of competing totally on price alone (Levitt, 1991; Porter, 1980). While most firms acknowledge the need to differentiate their product or service from competitive offerings, executing an effective positioning strategy can be difficult. First, trends in today's business environment make positioning more complex, and perhaps less amenable to previously used positioning approaches. Information flows more freely than in the past, which exposes similarities between competitive offerings, and also provides firms with opportunities to more quickly copy successful product or service improvements. As a result, many markets face a commodity situation with direct price and feature competition. Long-term brand-customer relationships are difficult to establish and maintain in such situations, which has prompted a significant shift in business practice. Firms such as Disney, Ritz Carlton, and Amazon.com have shifted their strategic focus from product or service features to offering consumers holistic experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). As Foley and Fahy (2004) point out, using experience for positioning presents new challenges for strategy development. What is an experience and how can it be used for competitive advantage? How can experiences be used to differentiate brands?

Though researchers have made considerable advances in our understanding of positioning

measurement and representation (e.g., see Carroll and Green, 1997; Green et al., 2000), both practitioners and academics have called for more research that develops the conceptual and strategic aspects of positioning practice (e.g., Alden et al., 1999; Myers, 1996). In light of the strategic shift toward offering customers meaningful experiences, our goal is to offer a framework for positioning that considers "experience" as its key construct, and demonstrate the application of our framework.

1. Experiential positioning

Experience is a keystone for understanding brands (Lee and Shavitt, 2009). Following the work of other marketing strategists (e.g., Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999), we suggest the concept of experiential positioning as a systematic approach for differentiating the firm's offering in the marketplace. Experiential positioning is the strategic process of understanding consumer desires, creating and delivering a particular form of experience, and communicating the firm's proposed experience to consumers in a way that differentiates the brand from competitors in the consumer's mind. Our concept of experience is founded in narrative psychology, and has been applied before to consumption situations. Consumer behavior researchers suggest that experience includes the customer's subjective responses (sensations, thoughts, feelings, actions, etc.) to consumption situations (e.g., Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Communicating and understanding experiences — including consumption experiences — are possible because people within a culture draw on the same set of general experiences (E. Bruner, 1986). The general experience we use to make sense of our restaurant encounter provides us with

expectations and norms for the people involved in the episode (customer/employee roles), the action sequence (script or plot), the setting (physical, social, and temporal environment), and so on. In effect, people use stories (or narratives) they know to understand what role they are to play, what role others in the episode will play, how those in the episode will act, the likely sequence of events, and possible reactions (sensory, affective, cognitive, and behavioral) to the episode (J. Bruner, 1986, 1990). These general experiences are encapsulated in mythology, folklore, history, religion, and other stories used to communicate the culture's values.

The preceding discussion has several critical implications for implementing experiential positioning effectively. First, firms must understand the range of possible general experiences associated with the consumption of their particular product or service, and develop some mechanism for assessing the relative importance to consumers of the different general experiences for the category. Second, experience represents the customers' responses during product/service consumption as they interact with the firm. Customers play an active role in producing the experience, which forces firms to think more carefully about the nature of the customer-brand interaction as it affects the experience. Third, because experience is a private event for each consumer, firms must take into consideration the likelihood of multiple interpretations of their experiential positioning strategy. For example, an advertisement depicting a Harley motoring down a lonely stretch of country road might arouse feelings of excitement and fun in one consumer, yet symbolize danger for another consumer. Finally, because experiential positioning is based on delivering experiences consumers desire, firms have to change their experiential offering as consumer desires for different experiences change. Can firms build flexibility into their experiential positioning strategy? How can changes in experiential positions be managed over time?

2. Creating the experience

Given the conceptualization of experience we draw from, we can summarize the requisite elements for creating an experiential positioning as including: 1) a theme, 2) characters (simplified via using archetypes), 3) a plot or action sequence, and 4) a setting (including the physical, social, and temporal context for the action).

The first consideration for the firm in designing an experience should be to identify a common theme for the experience. A theme helps focus the strategic effort by ensuring consistency in the experiential

marketing mix, which provides consumers with a unified experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). Also, a theme highlights specific "experiential providers" (Schmitt, 1999) for delivering the experience. For example, United Airlines theme "Fly the Friendly Skies" emphasizes friendship, which implies personnel will be a significant component of the experience for customers. Selecting and training personnel with good interpersonal skills is a critical element for delivering this theme. In contrast, the Hard Rock Café, with its themes of rock music and café primarily emphasizes the physical (café) and social environment (hard rock, energetic, etc.) required to deliver the experience.

After deciding on a theme for the experience, the firm must decide how the characters will interact to influence the customer's experience. Since consumers' knowledge of social interactions (i.e. their general experiences) is embedded in the myths and stories they know (Levy, 1981), firms can use common character types, or archetypes, from common stories to represent and structure their interaction to customers. Archetypes come in dyads (e.g., father/son, ruler/subject, teacher/student), and have specific functions and social roles determined by the cultural norms for specific forms of social relationship. For example, in a master/servant relationship, we would expect the master to give instructions, which are carried out by the servant. The use of specific archetypes will determine the type of relationship between the customer and the firm and the expected roles and activities of each partner during the experience. The archetype dyad should be integrated with the action sequence that makes up the customer's experience. In what order should events occur, and who performs each action necessary to complete the interaction? For example, if the firm uses the master/servant dyad, then the customer will initiate the action and guide the action with instructions that the firm will carry out. Planning the action sequence from both the customer's point of view and also the firm's point of view provides a plot for the action to follow and identifies key interaction points that can be used to enhance the experience.

To support the archetype dyad and the action sequence required to deliver the experience, the firm must design an environment that enhances the experience. The environment includes social, physical, and temporal components. Many firms are capitalizing on the physical (or virtual) environments in which they deliver the product or service to influence the customer's experience (Bitner, 1992). However, our framework also highlights the importance of the social and temporal

environment. The social environment should support the archetype dyad while the temporal environment will primarily be integrated with the action sequence. The environment constrains the activity during the experience and can provide situational cues that the customer uses to navigate and interpret the situation.

3. Communicating the experience

Having created an experiential form of interacting with the customer, the firm must decide how to communicate their experiential offering to consumers (e.g., Foley and Fahy, 2004; Schmitt, 1999). We liken the role of communication in the process of experiential positioning to the use of personal advertisements. Like individuals who use personal advertisements, firms must communicate complex messages succinctly using cultural norms. Archetypes allow firms to communicate what they are, who they want as customers, and also what they are not, and what type of customers they do not want. Consumers' likelihood of responding to personal advertisements is an interactive function of their evaluation of the suitor, as well as a self-evaluation that assesses compatibility and potential for a relationship. Advertising scholars suggest a similar process in relationship building for firms via advertising (e.g., Stern, 1988; Fournier, 1998). In effect, the firm will make a proposition — an experiential proposition — that will present the consumer a specific form of experience if the customer interacts with the brand. The set of brands in the category will offer competing propositions that will be accepted or rejected by different segments of consumers.

4. Methodology

Using the domain of online brokerage services as a case study, we analyzed a large sample of TV advertisements from general and investment programs from late 1999 and early 2000, a period of high growth for the brokerage market, to examine how firms propose different kinds of investing experience. We reviewed over 200 hours of programming, which yielded 310 brokerage advertisement exposures, consisting of 106 unique executions, representing 27 companies. We restrict our discussion to the 17 firms that had a minimum of 3 distinct advertisement executions.

We used a four step process to analyze the positioning structure evidenced in the advertisement set. In Step 1 we analyzed each advertisement using Burke's Dramatistic Pentad (1969) to identify characters and their motives, plot, and setting elements. In Step 2 we looked for patterns across the different executions within each brand to develop a general theme, archetypal relationship (see Pearson 1991 for a formal classification), plot, and setting to arrive at a specific experiential position for each firm. In Step 3 we analyzed the deeper structure of the entire system of advertisements by analyzing similarities and differences between the different experiential positions across firms (c.f. Floch, 1988; Langholz-Leymore, 1987). In Step 4 we examined the shadow forms of the customer and firm archetypes. The shadow form typically represents a negative extension of the primary archetype (e.g., father can be nurturing or abusive). This stage recognizes that meaning derives not only from what appears in the advertisement, but also from what is absent (Stern, 1996). Thus, Step 4 deconstructs the messages to bring underlying assumptions to the surface and reveal possible alternative interpretations of the brands' experience propositions and position.

5. Results

Each advertisement was examined to identify elements of an online trading experience. Table 1 contains a synopsis of the four Datek advertisements analyzed in our study. While each advertisement provides an execution of the experiential position for Datek, methodologically, the more critical level of analysis was the firm level analysis, where the firm's experiential position (aggregate characters, their relationship, plot, and setting cues) is repeated and reinforced across advertisements in a campaign. From Table 1, we can see that the four Datek advertisements work together to create and reinforce an experiential proposition labeled "The Berlin Wall". United by the tagline "The rules are changing", the campaign presents a variety of scenarios that show how the old regime is being forced out of power. Datek, cast as a revolutionary warrior, leads the revolt against the unjust traditions that gave Wall Street insiders an advantage over less privileged investors. Prospective customers are cast as the oppressed masses — archetypal orphans who have suffered the abuses and injustice of the system.

Table 1. Synopsis of Datek advertisements

Advertisement execution	Description of events in the advertisement	Interpretation of events
Walls coming down	Hordes of people assemble at the stock exchange and find themselves separated from the action on the trading floor. They press against the glass and doors until the walls come down and the masses flood the trading floor signaling that Wallstreet's technological tools are now available to everyone.	"Information is fundamental to investing. Why should elitist professional brokers be so privileged and hold an unfair advantage at the expense of the masses? Datek challenges the status quo and tears down the barriers that restricted peoples' access to information and technology."

Table 1 (cont.). Synopsis of Datek advertisements

Advertisement execution	Description of events in the advertisement	Interpretation of events
Doctor tells broker	Checking his patient's blood pressure, the elder doctor asks the young man (a broker) if he is stressed about the rising popularity of online investing. The patient retorts that it is not the same; he's a Wall Street professional. The doctor states he has access to continuous information, just like at the exchange. The broker gazes ahead, perplexed, mouth agape.	"Can't wait to tell that young, cocky, know-it-all broker that you no longer have a use for his services? Datek makes full-service brokers obsolete with their information technology."
Heard about George?	Playing racquetball, two Wall Street brokers have a conversation about George, a software guy who was able to buy a stock (presumably a hot IPO). Faced with the fact that they no longer hold a monopoly on trading, one of the brokers mutters, "I hate that guy."	"The tables have turned. After being taken advantage of by brokers for years and years, investors can now place their own trades and have equal access to IPOs. The Wall Street empire is crumbling and brokers are anxious. Revenge is sweet."
Why me?	Sitting at a table in a cocktail lounge, a young broker (who has only been working a year) laments how Internet trading has messed up his career plans. He asks: "What's going to happen to guys like me?" to which another man replies "Thought about getting your own website?"	"It is the end of an era. Investors are switching to online brokerages to place their trades. No longer able to profit from customers' commissions, brokers are faced with the daunting prospect of having to earn their money. Sweet irony."

Datek comes to their rescue and rallies the underdogs against a common enemy (full-service brokers) by exposing the hidden truths of Wall Street. Metaphorically, the firm pulls back the Iron Curtain to reveal freedoms that were impossible under the old rules (a.k.a. Communism). Now it is

time for the masses to enlist and arm themselves with Datek's technology to defend themselves against further abuses. Table 2 lists each firm's experience proposition and identifies the dominant customer and firm archetypes and roles that constitute the relationship.

Table 2. Experiential propositions: online trading and investing

Firm "Slogan"	Experience proposition Firm/Customer archetypes (Literary types)	Firm characterization	Customer characterization
ERITRADE "Believe in yourself"	The American Dream Buddy / Buddy (Magician / Lover)	Liberator celebrates the democratization of trading by offering all people (regardless of age, ethnicity...) the opportunity to participate.	Underdogs celebrate freedom with passion; eager to prove worthiness and strive to "be the master of your destiny".
DATEK "The rules are changing"	The Berlin Wall Revolutionary/Oppressed (Warrior / Orphan)	Freedom fighter levels the playing field by providing the masses with the same technological advantages enjoyed by the elite.	Tired of being exploited and excluded, masses of investors are poised to seize control of their finances by joining the do-it-yourself revolution.
E*TRADE "It's time for E*Trade, the #1 place to invest online"	Revenge of the Nerds Muse / Underdog (Magician / Orphan)	Sympathetic supporter urges mistreated investors to stand up to bully brokers, to take control and let their intellect prevail.	They're been laughed at, picked on, and put down by brokers. The time has come for them to use intellect and ambition to get even.
MY TRACK "I trade my way with My Track"	Fantasy Sports Camp Genie / Contender (Magician / Fool)	Responsive firm grants aspiring investors' wish to gain access to advanced trading equipment used by pros.	Wannabe investors seek the opportunity to trade like the pros using the same equipment used in the big leagues.
SURETRADE "The smart tool for smart investors"	The Expedition Outfitter / Prospector(Sage / Seeker)	Merchant peddles essential technological tools at bargain prices to support individuals' financial quests.	Self-confident visionaries persevere to blaze a trail to financial success by thinking and acting independently.
POWERSTREET (by Fidelity) "Online trading gets personal"	Her Majesty's Secret Service Q / 007 (or other agent) (Sage / Seeker)	Gadgetry expert invents customizable Palm-based trading tool that lets investors trade anywhere, anytime.	Experienced investor looks for a personalized technological gizmo to gain the upper hand.

Table 2 (cont.). Experiential propositions: online trading and investing

Firm "Slogan"	Experience proposition Firm/Customer archetypes (Literary types)	Firm characterization	Customer characterization
TD WATERHOUSE "XPRS YRSLF" [express yourself]	Butler Servant / Master (Caregiver / Ruler)	Experienced, devoted staff efficiently executes assigned duties (transactions) unsupervised.	Busy, focused investor wants to complete tasks without any hassles to meet ambitious personal goals.
DLJ DIRECT "Putting our reputation online"	Partnership Consultant / Client (Sage / Sage)	Skilled team of experts has a reputation for gathering up to date (and often exclusive) information from many sources for clients.	Conservative information-seekers know what they want (and know what they're talking about).
MY DISCOUNT BROKER "Your investments. Your way"	The Mission God / Missionary (Creator / Lover)	Venerated, enigmatic firm delights users, answers their prayers in times of need via 24/7 1-800 line.	Enthusiastic users praise firm and spread the good news to others.
WEB STREET "Invest with ambition"	My Big Brother Big brother/Little brother (Caregiver / Innocent)	Caring family member offers words of encouragement, always on the lookout for risks, comes to the rescue.	Neophyte investor strives to navigate a path to financial success in perilous market environment.
NATIONAL DISCOUNT BROKER (NDB) "We take you under our wing"	Boarding School Instructor / Pupil (Caregiver / Orphan)	Self-assured educator teaches the unskilled how to manage investments, touting credentials by showing awards.	Inexperienced and uninformed investors rely on NDB University to develop their investment skills.
CHARLES SCHWAB "Creating a world of smarter investors"	MBA Teacher / Student (Caregiver / Seeker)	Trustworthy educator helps investors develop their decision-making skills.	Eager students seek to improve their investment skills to shape their financial futures.
MORGAN STANLEY DEAN WITTER (MSDW) "Success. One investor at a time" "Know your source"	The Sorcerer's Apprentice Mentor / Novice (Magician / Innocent)	Respectful mentor provides personal attention to nurture and protect individuals (who don't yet fully appreciate the perils of investing).	Aspiring investors recognize the limits of their knowledge; seek the help of a financial expert for tutoring and money management wizardry.
FIDELITY "We help you invest responsibly"	Father-Son Talk Emperor / Subject (Ruler / Innocent)	Devoted father guards family's interests and dispenses advice to temper novices' exuberance.	Somewhat naive in matters of investing, novice hands over decision-making power to seasoned veteran.
MERRILL LYNCH "Any way you want it"	Knights of the Round Table Team / Boss (Caregiver / Ruler)	Enthusiastic, devoted team works around the clock to proactively protect the client's interests.	Sophisticated investor designates responsibility to team and expects results while offering limited supervision.
OLDE "America's full service discount broker"	Tailored Suit Tailor / Professional (Creator / Ruler)	Skilled artisan offers personalized advice to suit individuals' needs; cost savings secures loyalty.	Busy, capable professionals hand over portfolio management to expert; can stay focused on life.
PAINE WEBBER "Thank you Paine Webber"	Disciple of Zen Zen master / Disciple (Magician / Fool)	Trusted advisor emanates peace and caring, transforms client's financial reality and exorcises worries.	Grateful believer moves out of striving to being; no longer anxious about finances, able to enjoy life to the fullest.

Having established the consistency of advertisements within campaigns, our attention turned to investigating the patterns of experience portrayed across campaigns. In certain cases it seems like firms are proposing the same basic type of investing experience. In other cases, the firms' experience propositions are so distinct that one wonders whether these firms are really competitors, even though they are part of the same industry. Such differences derive in part from the degree of responsibility assumed by the consumer in

managing their investments. Indeed, firms can be organized along a continuum from fully self-directed to fully delegated, according to the roles presented in their experience propositions.

Similarly, firms differ in terms of the level of service they provide to consumers in the online trading experience. Some firms portray themselves as facilitators that simply ease consumers' entry into the arena of online trading by offering a

platform for placing trades. In contrast, other firms offer a broad assortment of premium services such as research reports, analytical tools, instruction, and consulting or fund management. Thus, firms' experience propositions can be sorted according to two dimensions: (1) the type of interaction the consumer has with the firm (technology-based / independent versus human advisor-based / dependent), and (2) the level of service provided by the firm (basic versus premium).

Together, these dimensions create a system of possibilities within which we can compare firms' experience positions. The Figure 1 contains an experiential positioning map that illustrates some key similarities and differences between firms' experience propositions. Based on the analyses, the Figure presents a snapshot of the relationship between firms' experience propositions for the time period investigated. We propose that the 17 experience propositions can be reduced to five basic types of experience: participation, safeguard, education, control, and delegation.

The different positions represent clusters of firms that offer similar experiences for customers. Firms offering customers an experience labeled "Participation" present customers with an opportunity to invest in the market using online technology with a basic service offering. Firms offering to "Safeguard" customers form the market also provide a basic service, but with a human advisor rather than technology interface. Another cluster of firms offers customers an "Education", though how this is accomplished varied among firms with some firms offering basic information while others provided more sophisticated services including access to financial advisors and research. Firms offering "Control" provided a variety of technology-based tools for investors to choose from with limited firm interaction or guidance. On the other hand, firms offering the "Delegation" experience presented customers with an option to have the firm handle the customer's investments. It is worth noting that the "Delegation" cluster contains most of the traditional brokerage firms and is in essence simply offering new customers access to the traditional investing model using a human broker.

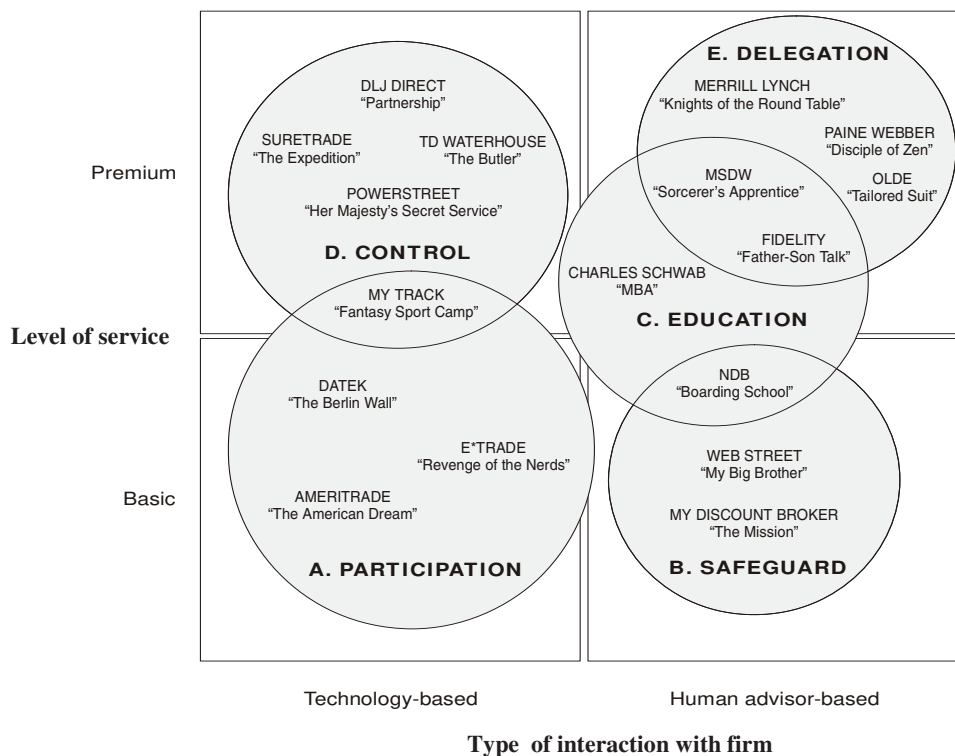


Fig. 1. Experiential positioning for the online investing market

Table 3 summarizes the essence of these positions, highlighting the key differences between the clusters in terms of the firm-customer relationship and the associated roles in the service provision. For instance, firms in the "Participation" cluster (Ameritrade, Datek, E*Trade, and My Track) offer prospective customers an opportunity to partake in the online trading revolution. In contrast, firms in the "Control" segment (DLJdirect, My Trade, Powerstreet, Suretrade, TD Waterhouse) suggested customers to be experienced,

self-directed investors. Hence, firms in this cluster offer sophisticated research and analytical tools to support individuals' decision-making styles.

Although most advertisements are centered on communicating what type of firm they are and what type of customer they are seeking, some advertisements use parody, hyperbole, and puns to reveal competitors' shadow sides or to demonstrate what they were not. Online brokers

employ this strategy routinely to undermine the merit of employing a full service broker, while more traditional brokerages countered to destroy do-it-yourselfers' illusions of competency and control, highlighting the negative side inherent in competitors' positioning. For example, Morgan Stanley Dean Witter's (MSDW) experiential

proposition, labeled "Sorcerer's Apprentice", features an assortment of advertisements that offer a grim warning to investors who believe they can work financial magic on their own. Like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, investors must be aware of their limits and should not attempt to exceed them.

Table 3. Experiential positions in the online brokerage industry

Experiential theme	Key customer needs	Customer's role	Firm's role
A. Participation	Empathy To be rescued To become involved	Neglected investors band together with firm to avenge past injustices committed by full-service brokerages; suffer no longer by becoming self-directed investors.	Make low cost self-service technology available to consumers who have been abused, ignored, or disrespected by competitors. Feel (and remove) their pain.
B. Safeguard	To trust Security Social acceptance	Neophyte investors depend on the assistance of others. Trusts that the firm will take care of them as they develop investment skills and looks to the future with great optimism.	Offer a helping hand to novice investors who are not fully aware of the perils of investing online. Earn customer loyalty by resolving technical troubles and answering their problems when they call.
C. Education	Exploring Self improvement Learning	Ambitious student on a quest to become a complete investor seeks to expand knowledge and skill set by learning lessons from a wise expert.	Instruct, coach and mentor student investors according to their ability and motivation.
D. Control	Freedom Independence Understanding	Self-directed investor assumes full responsibility, seeks objective information and tech tools to support decision-making.	Lavish scientific research and technological resources upon sophisticated self-directed investors.
E. Delegation	Peace of mind Maintain order Pleasurable life	Realist has no desire to manage investments alone. Appoints responsibility to another and trusts that they will do a good job. Limits involvement to validating key decisions; gets on with enjoying life.	Attend to customer requests with compassion and respect. Create and maintain a prosperous and peaceful kingdom for the client; offer guidance and advice when considered necessary.

6. Future research directions

Our results offer important possibilities for future research. First, our results suggest the need for firms to carefully consider the long-term consequences of their initial experiential proposition. Given the relational nature of the dyad, a key issue is how the relationship between the customer and firm evolves over time (see Deighton and Grayson, 1995; Fournier, 1998). Relationships vary in intensity, level of commitment, duration, and outcomes for both the firm and customer. From our results, some of the propositions appear more stable than others. For example, once Datek helps its customers "free themselves", then what? Once liberated do they need the change catalyst anymore? How does this influence the long-term prospects for Datek? More study is needed to gain a more thorough understanding of the trajectory for the archetypal dyad relationships.

Second, though we reported a sample of findings related to the shadow form for the different archetypes, a more thorough study is needed to

understand how a target market reacts. Different people may find different meaning in advertisements (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Scott, 1994). As Lee and Shavitt (2009) point out, general experiences are used to understand brand interactions, but brand perceptions can be quite stable across time and application. This raises key questions. How stable are archetypes across segments and time? Are certain archetypes more open to shadow form interpretations? The concept of experiential positioning provides a theoretically based framework to examine these strategic issues.

Finally, though applied in the current case study to the online brokerage industry, our framework for experiential positioning should be applicable to other market contexts. However, note that the online brokerage industry represents a service, and services by their very nature are more experiential than durable goods. Hence, another potentially fruitful option for future research would be to investigate the applicability of our framework in other contexts. Could manufacturers such as Proctor

and Gamble benefit from considering the “experience” of using their brands and hence, develop experiential positions using common archetypes? Would the choice of archetypes be similar or systematically different for goods when compared to services? Taken together, these questions offer several important possibilities for future research.

Conclusion

The analysis revealed several key findings. First, from a managerial perspective, our framework allowed us to identify differences across firms in archetype dyads and the corresponding roles played by customer and firm in the relationship. For example, though Merrill Lynch and Fidelity represented full-service input, they represent different roles during the investing experience. Merrill Lynch operates as a team that requires little supervision, working to support the customer. Much of their work occurs behind the scenes. In contrast, Fidelity “protects” its customers by pointing them in the right direction to keep them from being irresponsible with their money. Notice Fidelity inverts the ruler role presented by Merrill Lynch. Hence, role differences were an important part of the experiential positioning strategy of each firm, and the customer roles represent different target markets. Our framework is managerially relevant and could be applied by firms in other market contexts to make strategy decisions.

Second, our case study demonstrated the robustness of the experiential positioning framework. Based on narrative psychology and literary theory, we used the basic building blocks of archetypes, theme,

characters, plot, and setting to expose positioning similarities and differences between firms and also clusters of firms within the market. As a result, our approach suggests that firms can use direct firm to form competitive tactics when developing a positioning strategy, but also suggests firms could develop competitive strategies indirectly by drawing comparisons to clusters of firms. For example, a firm could try to compete directly with another firm by highlighting the customer’s ability to speak directly with a human advisor compared to another firm’s lack of human support options, or use a more indirect approach by comparing the human advisor access to firms that only provide technology in a do-it-yourself format. This multi-level approach offers a richer view of the market structure than typical firm level analyses, offering a more comprehensive approach to positioning for practitioners and scholars.

Finally, in this case study we proposed and demonstrated a methodological approach that complemented our experiential positioning framework. Beginning with an analysis of each advertisement’s story foundation, we aggregated the character types, plot, and setting cues using Burke’s Dramatistic Pentad to represent the brand level experiential proposition. We then aggregated firms by examining similarities and differences across experiential propositions to describe clusters of firms with similar proposition to express the underlying positioning structure of the market. This approach provides a template for other scholars and practitioners to follow when conducting similar studies of positioning.

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