

**OBVIOUSLY AWESOME:
HOW TO NAIL PRODUCT
POSITIONING SO
CUSTOMERS GET IT, BUY
IT, LOVE IT**
by April Dunford

Summary & Worksheet

durmonski.com

The Book In Three Or More Sentences:

Tight, to-the-point book on product positioning without unnecessary fluff or gimmicks. Obviously Awesome will make you dangerously good at framing your products and cutting through the noise. The author, April Dunford, is an expert in making complicated services easy for customers to get. In this read, she shares her field-tested approach that will show you how your products can finally be perceived by your customers as (obviously) awesome.

The Core Idea:

Nothing is more important than product positioning. Even if what you're selling is useful, if you can't correctly communicate this with your potential clients, all of your efforts will be wasted. Obviously Awesome will help you think about your product from the perspective of your clients. Then, make the necessary changes to your message, and adjustments to your product roadmap, so customers can finally figure out why they should buy what you offer.

Highlights:

- *It doesn't matter what type of product you have. If it's not properly positioned and placed in the right context. People still won't care.*
- *If people don't get what you're selling, they won't buy. You need to make your features obvious in the eyes of your customers.*
- *How you think about your product will also impact how your product will evolve. Misinterpret what the market wants, and you'll waste years creating something others will not want.*

6 Key Lessons from Obviously Awesome:

- *Lesson #1: Why Positioning is Important and What Happens When You Don't Do It*
- *Lesson #2: World-Class Products Positioned Poorly Will Fail*
- *Lesson #3: Customers Need To Easily Understand What You're Offering*
- *Lesson #4: Understand The Different Components of Good Positioning*
- *Lesson #5: Good Positioning Is a 10-Step Process*
- *Lesson #6: Repurpose The Ideas of Product Positioning for Personal Branding*

Lesson #1: Why Positioning is Important and What Happens When You Don't Do It

The first time product positioning was mentioned was in 1981. In a publication by Al Ries and Jack Trout.

The reason this concept became necessary for brands was the uprising of products that copied other products. While users were previously able to choose between one or two items in a category. Suddenly, the market was crowded and buyers were overwhelmed with the available options.

Simply launching a product wasn't enough. You now had to figure out how to present your offering in the best possible way, so your strengths can appear as superior to your competitors.

And as technology advances, this need to showcase what you offer in the best and simplest possible way is getting even more important.

The author argues that when customers see a product they have never seen before, they immediately start to look for clues. Similarities in the packaging, the message, the overall feel, and compare these with what they already know from other products. These observations help them answer the following questions: What is this? Who it is for? Should I care about this?

April Dunford illustrates product positioning as similar to an opening scene in a movie. As the first few minutes are crucial for a movie because they set the expectations of the viewer. The same is true for product positioning. You want, right from the start, to associate your product with other similar products in the right category and also to set the right expectations. If you fail to do so, viewers, or as in your

case buyers, will walk away confused, disappointed. Or worse, not interested at all.

But that's not the only problem. The market is constantly changing. Even if you put a lot of effort into positioning your product in the best possible way, this framework will probably become obsolete a couple of years from now. Meaning that it's a continuous effort towards defining how you're better than the rest.

“If we fail at positioning, we fail at marketing and sales. If we fail at marketing and sales, the entire business fails.” April Dunford

Lesson #2: World-Class Products Positioned Poorly Will Fail

Joshua Bell, an internationally acclaimed violinist, who sells out concerts in minutes, was asked to play the violin in a busy subway station in Washington, DC.

The Washington Post, conducting this contextual experiment wanted to see if people will appreciate his skills regardless of where he was playing – positioned.

Would people heavily support his efforts and match his regular paycheck which is around \$300 per ticket, or they will simply associate him with “another” street artist? That was the main question.

It turned out to be the latter.

Reportedly, Bell performed for around forty-five minutes and earned \$32.17 in total. More than 1000 people passed by him and out of those people only 27 gave him money and only 7 paused to fully appreciate his talent.

In interviews after that, most people said that he's “just a guy trying to make a buck.”

What does this experiment tell us?

When Joshua Bell is positioned in a concert hall, people see his skills and his overall performance as more valuable. When he's performing in a subway station, things look very different.

The product – his music – is absolutely the same. However, how people view and comprehend the value of his work shifted.

As you can see, the contextual association is something of great importance.

It's critical to place your products in the right context and environment. Right from the start, you should help potential customers make sense of what you're offering and also explain why they should care.

“If you're a baker, aking bread, you're a baker. If you make the best bread in the world, you're not an artist, but if you bake the bread in the gallery, you're an artist. So the context makes the difference.” Marina Abramovic

Lesson #3: Customers Need To Easily Understand What You're Offering

Good product positioning introduces the following paradox: People should easily get what you're selling – meaning that they should associate your brand with something known. On the other hand, though, you should also deliberately choose to be different.

Plainly, you should be easily recognizable and at the same time perceived as unique and innovative.

That's why it is difficult to craft a good positioning for your brand and respectively the products you offer. Especially in the current market dynamics.

Before we look at what the author offers as a process to make good product positioning, let's see what are the signs that basically tell you that you need to work more on your positioning game:

- 1. Customers love what you do but new prospects can't figure you out:** If you spend most of your time handling pre-sales inquiries instead of closing deals this means that people don't really understand what you offer. And when people can't quickly figure out what you offer, they will do their own positioning – put you in a box where your strengths are not shining bright enough. To fix this, you can turn to your existing customers for help. Ask them to describe how they view your brand. This feedback will give you the right words so you can explain your products better.
- 2. You rarely close deals and your sales cycles are unexcitingly long:** If prospects spend weeks evaluating your offering and often drop right before the finish line you have a huge problem. Not only that you're wasting your time explaining yourself, but you're also not making any money. Products with strong positioning make their value obvious.

3. **Your churn rate is high:** Customers are leaving shortly after they've made a purchase? You're receiving tons of inquiries about additional features? This means that your customers are misunderstanding what your product is all about. If your positioning is weak while you're heavily investing in marketing, you're doing it wrong. Set the right expectations to reduce the churn rate.
4. **You're pressured by your price:** Customers are complaining about your high price? Or worse, not buying at all? Charging premium is something you can afford but only if you clearly communicate that you're the market leader and demonstrate how you can bring value to their lives.

“Understanding something new is challenging because we don't yet have a frame of reference. When we lack context for a product, the easiest way to create one is by starting with something we already know.” April Dunford

Lesson #4: Understand The Different Components of Good Positioning

The author argues that most people are bad at positioning because there are no clear guides available on how to do this activity properly.

Most, actually, focus too much on filling positioning statements that are flawed for two main reasons: 1) The exercise assumes that you already know all the answers; 2) The popular fill-in the gap statements large companies use to position their products reinforces the status quo and doesn't help you figure out what to do next.

After all, how are you supposed to answer questions like: “What are our benefits?” and “How are we better than the competitors?” if you don't first do some research? You can't. Or at least the answers you'll come up with won't clearly show your top benefits.

In the book, April Dunford introduces her way of product positioning that promises to make your offering obviously awesome.

The following five (plus one) components will help you effectively position your product:

1. **Competitive alternatives:** Before you even think about positioning your product, think about what your customers would use or do if your product is nonexistent. This anticipation of how customers think will help you define the border of what is known to the users. If most potential customers are used to relying on spreadsheets, for example, then spreadsheets are the norm sort to speak. They will compare your product to using spreadsheets and define if your

- product is better or worse compared to that.
2. **Unique attributes:** The author writes, “Your unique attributes are your secret sauce, the things you can do that the alternatives can’t.” This is something you have that others don’t. In most cases, you’ll have a lot of unique, or at least different from what others have, features. The idea here is to clearly outline them in a way that people will actually *get* how you are different and better.
 3. **Value (and proof):** People buy your products because of the value they get from them. To showcase your value, however, you can’t rely on your own words. You must include the opinions of your current customers along with other fact-based statements.
 4. **Target market characteristics:** Once you know what you’re selling, you also need to figure out who is most likely to purchase it. This step is about figuring out the category of people who care mostly about the things you bring to the table. To identify the people who will buy quickly what you have to offer. You have to be really specific and target customers based on your unique attributes. A good question here to ask is the following: “What types of customers would you focus on? What are the characteristics of those customers that make them more likely to buy?”
 5. **Market category:** Customers need to clearly understand what you’re offering. To give them a point of reference, you’ll have to place your product in an already existing category. This categorization will help people figure out what you do, who are your competitors, and how is your product potentially better. Based on your positioning, where you place your product will either help or hurt your offering. To make this a positive, do some research in order to choose the correct category, so your value can be obvious to customers.
 6. **Relevant trends:** Trends, when used properly, can convince customers to pay attention to what you offer right now. A good example mentioned in the book is of a company selling furniture. Every year, the Pantone website selects what is called the “color of the year.” If you create a couch that is using the new trendy color, you’re still in the couch business. But you’re enhancing the product and telling users why your couch is cool now – because of the color you used.

All components should first be examined individually and then glued together. The first, not so obvious step is to see what customers are already doing. Once you know, you can better articulate your unique attributes and show the world how you can better help them.

“Position your product in a market category that puts your offering’s strengths in their best context, and then look for relevant trends in your industry that can help customers understand why they should consider this product right now.” April Dunford

Lesson #5: Good Positioning Is a 10-Step Process

These are the steps the author considers as the ultimate process for product positioning:

- 1. Step 1: Understand the customers who love your product:** There are customers who like what you do and there are those who love what you do. To position your product better, you need to focus on the group of people who adore you. Once you know who they are, you can see why they are so obsessed with what you offer. Examining the reasons why they consume your products can help you see patterns and understand what your positioning should be. If you're new to the market, and if you're yet to acquire happy customers, your best strategy is to put your product in front of a large audience. This will help you amass critical feedback.
- 2. Step 2: Form a positioning team:** Everyone, absolutely everyone in your company can contribute to the product positioning. The author proposes to gather the point of view of each department in your company because different people experience products differently. Once the data has been collected, a new statement can be formulated. Statement based on the experience of a large user base. The important thing here is to bury the old ways of thinking and try a different approach.
- 3. Step 3: Align your positioning vocabulary and let go of your positioning baggage:** The main purpose of the book is to help you associate your product with the best market and also make your values obvious to the customer. This often requires you to abandon your initial assumption of what you have created so that you can focus on the category that best describes your value propositions. Abandon what you currently think about your product and adopt a new, unbiased view.
- 4. Step 4: List your true competitive alternatives:** April Dunford writes, "You need to understand who your real competitors are in the minds of customers." To do this, the best question you can ask as presented in the book is the following: "What would our best customers do if we didn't exist?" The thing that often comes to mind is your competitors. But that's not always correct. A lot of times, the alternative to your product can be simply "using a pen and paper" or "hiring someone." Or, even, not doing anything at all.
- 5. Step 5: Isolate your unique attributes or features:** To find your unique features, list all the capabilities of what you offer that others don't. Once you have a full list, focus on the characteristics that can drive real benefit. But don't simply state that you have the best customer support, for example. Prove it. Simply stating "world-class support" is useless. Figure out how yours is better. If your employees have certificates, work 24/7, or are specialists in a spe-

cific field, you absolutely need to mention it. These things actually prove that your support is truly world-class.

6. **Step 6: Map the attributes to value “themes”:** If we continue with the example above, we can state that world-class support is a feature, not a benefit. The benefit to the customer is not that you have awesome support, the benefit comes from the fact that your customers can feel safe when using your services and also get a timely response to their inquiries. Same with things like “20-megapixel camera.” Regular users are careless about how many pixels exist inside their cameras. They are more concerned about taking quality pictures. Meaning that “snapping sharper images” is the benefit. And once you have the benefit, you can then outline the value this feature brings (usually one benefit can contribute to a couple of value points). Sharp photos mean more likes on social media and better quality when these photos are printed.
7. **Step 7: Determine who cares a lot:** Not everyone will care about your product. Or at least they won’t equally care. Step 7 is about segmentation. But not the usual segmentation outlined in most marketing courses or books. Here you don’t focus on demographics. The author focuses on finding people and companies that are really in need of what you have to offer. The importance here comes from the fact that best-fit customers are the easiest to sell to and retain. To start making adjustments, you can, instead of labeling your product as “accounting software” position it as “accounting software for freelancers or lawyers.” With this simple twist, your product will be now perceived by accountants and lawyers as a must-have tool.
8. **Step 8: Find a market frame of reference that puts your strengths at the center:** Here, you’ll have to make your value obvious for your potential customers. To do this, you need to place your product in a category. Respectively, this category will create certain assumptions in the minds of your customers – that’s why you need to be careful. The best way to position your product is by creating a new market based on an already existing market (e.g. accounting software + artificial intelligence). This is very difficult for execution, but the rewards can be massive. To help users get what you’re selling fast, focus on selling the market on the problem first. Tell people what their problem is before you mention your solution. Customers usually don’t understand the real scale of the problems they have.
9. **Step 9: Layer on a trend (but be careful):** The perfect positioning is a combination of your product’s strengths, the context of the market you’re aiming at, and an exciting trend. If we consider these three as circles, the spot where all these three intersect can be considered as the perfect story of your product. Be careful when you’re considering trends, though. The aim should be to make your product new and cool for the customers, not to confuse them. The author mentions a company called Long Island Iced Tea which decided to change its name to Long Blockchain. There was no con-

nection between the tea they offered and blockchain technology. It was simply done to make their drink appear trendy. The company was eventually removed from the stock market because the new positioning made no sense.

10. Step 10: Capture your positioning so it can be shared: Everyone in the company should know clearly how your company is positioned. Create a statement where you describe which market category you occupy, your unique attributes, values, the people who should care, and the alternative solutions. Once the statement is ready, make sure to distribute it to all the different units and departments in your company.

“Great positioning rarely comes by default. If you want to succeed, you have to determine the best way to position your product. Deliberate, try, fail, test and try again.” April Dunford

Lesson #6: Repurpose The Ideas of Product Positioning for Personal Branding

You need to associate your product with the closest thing possible – the best market category. This will give people a point of reference. If you fail at this step, you will fail at all the other steps. You will also fail at your product roadmap because you will think of your product the wrong way.

Let’s unpack this further...

The moment you decide that you are creating software for accounting purposes, for example, is the moment you also make a set of critical business decisions.

You decide (consciously or not) what will be the price, who are your competitors, what will be the key features, and how your product roadmap will look like.

If you don’t place your idea in the correct context right from the start, you are dooming your product to failure – or at the very least ending in an undesirable setting. Your inaccurate perception of your offering will lead to incorrect future additions that no one will want.

The above context applies, and can be used, for other purposes.

Beyond the context of product positioning, this book and the ideas inside can also help you in another dimension. Namely, your personal positioning.

The ideas of product positioning can be harnessed and applied to

you as a person. Put differently, to better position your personality in front of others.

If you think of yourself as an average guy/girl who's not very smart nor ambitious, you unfavorably position yourself. You won't expect much of yourself, and thus you won't get much from the world.

In contrast, if you position yourself as an expert, or at least consider yourself as someone who is good at doing X, your time will be now occupied differently. You will look for ways to improve your skills and prove to yourself, and to others, that you really know what you're doing.

Even out of the context to impress others, you will still be a lot better than what you previously expected from yourself – nothing much.

So, this personal positioning is basically thinking about what you want to become and where you want to end up in life. This way of thinking will help you better structure your days. You will be more strategic with your time and know what you should focus on now, and also in the future.

“A change in positioning usually impacts marketing and sales first but it often has impacts well beyond that. Changing the way the company thinks about itself will usually have an impact on how product features get prioritized in the future. It makes sense that the roadmap for “accounting software” would look really different from the roadmap for “financial services.” Great positioning is usually strengthened over time with adjustments in features.” April Dunford

Actionable Notes:

- **Put your product in the best context possible:** If you're a baker who wants to create a cake that is consumable while walking down the street, you can put a stick on it and call it “cake on a stick.” However, when people hear the word cake they make associations related to slices, desserts, frosting, etc. The stick only confuses people. That's why, to put the “cake on the stick” in a better context, you can associate your idea with the closest possible product – lollipop. This way, the stick, and the shape will make a lot more sense for the consumer. And in this example, it's not a desert, it's a snack. It's, as mentioned in the book, “it's a lollipop for grownups, so we made it out of cake.” That said, successful positioning is when your product is associated with another known product that perfectly describes the unique qualities supplemented with something exciting.

- **Avoid the two traps:** There are two traps product creators often fall into: 1) You're too obsessed with your initial idea that you fail to realize that your product has changed during the creation process; 2) You spend a lot of time positioning your product for a specific market but eventually realize that the market has changed. In both examples, it is essential to take into consideration external points of view. Your product and the market are not constant. Both require care and adjustments to best-fit the minds of consumers.
- **What people will do or use if your product didn't exist?** This is the simplest, yet probably most important question in the book. Imagining what people will use if your solution is not available, non-existent, will help you figure out how prospects act in everyday life. The author here is not only talking about choosing your competitors as an alternative. But also, considering things like "using a spreadsheet," "using a pen and paper," or even "not doing anything." Once you know what people are most likely to do, or not do, you can use this as a context to better present your values.
- **Create a new category:** The best way to position your product is by creating a new category. However, this is the most difficult strategy for execution for two main reasons: First, new market categories mean spending resources teaching customers why you need to exist. And secondly, the just-mentioned takes a lot of time. The opportunities are huge, though. You'll be the market leader and what makes you different from others will eventually work to your advantage. In this style of positioning the best approach is to focus more on the problem your customers face. Don't talk a lot about your product. Talk more about the problem. This way, what you have in store will come as the natural solution when people realize that they do have a problem. For example, consider for a moment the iconic 1984 Apple commercial. There is not even the slightest reference to actual computers in the video. The creators were focusing more on the ideology and the problem – creatives who want to change the world and are tired of big corporations.
- **Think carefully about how you view your brand (and yourself):** The way you think about your brand will impact the future of the products you create. That's why it's of great importance to spend a lot of time figuring out what you actually do, what you want to do, and what you should do. Additionally, it's equally important to outline what you absolutely shouldn't do. What you consider important will shape all future developments, as well as your overall product roadmap. If you fail to find the best-fit market category for your product, you will also fail at the features you'll later add because you'll pursue the wrong incentives. Or in other words, the future development of your brand and products depends on your positioning and how you think about these things. These same principles apply to you as a person. If you consider yourself an accountant, you'll focus your attention on doing accountant-related things. That's why it's important to ask this: What do you think of yourself?

Commentary and My Personal Takeaway

Product positioning seems easy only to people who have never done it before. Fortunately, *Obviously Awesome: How to Nail Product Positioning so Customers Get It, Buy It, Love It* exists. This is the go-to book for crafting a well-established concept for your products.

April Dunford is considered the leading expert in product positioning. She spent most of her career working with startups and firms to find the best approach to present their products in the best possible light in front of the right audience. The systematic approach and the absence of fluff in her book are proof that she knows what she's doing.

If you're spending a lot of dollars on marketing but if you're not seeing a lot of returns. Or, if you're receiving a lot of inquiries from potential buyers but these usually end up not buying, this book will show you how to make the market work for you instead of against you.

Making your product easy to get by prospects should be your main goal when creating something. And *Obviously Awesome* aims to make your product obvious in the minds of your customers.

The key takeaway?

The way you think about your product plays a huge role in the actual product development. If you think of your product as a cake, your future choices will be related to this concept. In contrast, if you think of your product as a muffin, you'll have a completely different approach. That's why first, figure out what you're creating, and how would you like it to evolve before you waste time and resources creating something you will end up not wanting – nor your customers.

Notable Quotes:

"The future isn't a place we are going to go, it's a place we get to create." Nancy Duarte

"Sometimes a product that was well positioned in a market suddenly becomes poorly positioned, not because the product itself has changed, but because markets around the product have shifted."
April Dunford

"You cannot be everything to everyone. If you decide to go north,

you cannot go south at the same time.” Jeroen De Flander

What to read next:

- [The Mom Test](#) by Rob Fitzpatrick [Summary]
- [The Innovator's Dilemma](#) by Clayton M. Christensen [Summary]
- [Building A Story Brand](#) by Donald Miller [Summary]

INTERACTIVE SHEET FOR NOTE-TAKING

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below (just type inside the boxes) to outline your future steps:

- 1. How can you describe your product currently?*
- 2. Is your product in the best possible category?*
- 3. What people will do or use if your product didn't exist?*
- 4. What you should add/remove if you want to place your product in a new market?*
- 5. Abandon your current belief to figure out your product roadmap:*

Don't forget to save your changes.