

Marketing

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THE RIGHT STUFF

By Eric Blais

***Positioning: The Battle for your Mind, 20th Anniversary Edition* BY AL RIES & JACK TROUT (McGraw-Hill, 2001)**

Had Marketing Magazine asked me to write about the single most important book marketers should read instead of the top ten, I would have picked the “bible” – Ries & Trout’s 1981 classic “Positioning : The Battle for your Mind”.

Twenty years later Ries & Trout’s pronouncements still ring true: “It’s better to be first than it is to be better. If you can’t be first in a category, then set up a new category you can be first in.” These simple yet powerful ideas have influenced a generation of marketers. For example, Adam Morgan’s book on challenger brands (Top Ten Book #5 *Eating the Big Fish: How challenger brands can compete against brand leaders*) likely found its inspiration in Ries & Trout’s notion that “it’s better to be a big fish in a small pond (and then increase the size of the pond) than to be a small fish in a big pond.”

Chapter 5 “You Can’t Get There from Here” should be repeated every morning in marketing departments the way associates at Wal-Mart do the Wal-Mart cheer. It’s a simple lesson: don’t fight perceptions with facts, perceptions will always win. The recent Volkswagen Phaeton luxury-car fiasco and the subsequent firing of Audi America’s VP for having publicly criticized the whole strategy prove the point. *Automotive News* summed it up: It could be the best car, but I would still not buy it because it has the VW logo and because I have to go to a VW dealership where the salesmen are used to selling Jettas and Golfs.”

The authors’ study of the human mind had major implications for marketers. This simple thought – you taste what you expect to taste – would have saved Coca-Cola from trying to improve on the taste of the real thing. In an information overloaded world, the idea that the human mind cannot deal with more than seven units at a time is an important lesson for marketers trying to jam every piece of information they can in their communications.

Reading this book again is a treat and it’s made more so if you read the 20th Anniversary Edition of the 1981 text. This new edition features commentary from the authors that offers fresh insights. What makes this fresh perspective so interesting is the authors’ candor about having been wrong. For example, they predicted that Pringles’ cardboard taste and its poor performance at launch would forever damage the brand; “in politics or packaged goods, the rule is once a loser, always a loser.” They might have been wrong on this one but twenty years later Ries & Trout’s concept of “positioning” remains the most right idea in marketing.

ERIC BLAIS, PRESIDENT OF CONSULTANCY HEADSPACE MARKETING, WRITES MONTHLY ON THE 10 MUST-READ BOOKS FOR MARKETERS