

In a new series looking at various aspects of health club management, we evaluate the importance of creating a clear market position for your club

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KNOW YOUR POSITION



What does your club stand for? It sounds like an innocent question, but scratch deeper and it reveals some fundamental truths about the long-term strategy and prospects for a club.

A few years ago I conducted research on an independent, well established health club in Milton Keynes with 1,800 members. A national operator was pre-selling a large-scale club less than five minutes away and the owner believed his club would be seriously affected by the new arrival, even though he had thrived in a city with an abundance of clubs. We spent the next few weeks getting close to members and it soon became apparent that the vast majority had no intention of leaving. They knew the club was neither the biggest nor had the latest equipment or even a pool. What members loved about the club was its informality. It was somewhere they could be themselves and meet familiar people. It was unpretentious and they enjoyed its friendly ambience and strong sense of community.

These intangible aspects of any business are extremely powerful and,

significantly, very difficult to imitate. Ask non-exercising members of the public to describe a health club and they will use terms such as competitive, intimidating, judgmental and full of young, fit people. The appeal of this small, local club was that its members saw it as the opposite of all those images. In the minds of its members, this friendly and neighbourly club was a core part of their lives, which is why it continued to thrive, with attrition rates of less than five per cent.

market positioning

Market positioning can be defined as creating a clear, distinctive and attractive market position in the minds of prospective members.

It is necessary because most of us suffer from information overload, bombarded as we are by thousands of messages via the TV, radio, internet and newspapers every day. Consequently, consumers have to filter extraordinary amounts of information. And, once consumers have registered a brand in their mind, it tends to endure.

So, how do you begin to position your club? I will use Curves as an example. This

women-only fitness franchise has grown to 10,000 international clubs in just 14 years – an average of 714 clubs every year – and has entered the Guinness Book of Records as the world's largest fitness chain. In terms of market segmentation, founder Gary Heavin identified women who wished to lose weight. Many were habitual dieters, struggling to keep weight off once lost. Heavin believed that weight management advice and a 30-minute exercise programme needed to be combined.

In creating a desirable market position, Curves needed to answer the following:

- Why were women put off health clubs?
- What do women above their ideal weight need from a health club?
- How is this segment served currently?
- What are the main barriers to women achieving weight management goals?
- How do we wish women to perceive our brand?
- What adjectives would members use to describe our brand?
- What resources do we need to mobilise to deliver what is required?
- Is there a new and attractive market position that we can claim?

Once the above had been answered, they could develop a positioning statement – a short statement that clearly articulates how the club wishes prospective and existing members to perceive it. Curves' positioning statement is: 'Discover a gym where women change their lives 30 minutes at a time.'

What I like about this is that Curves has incorporated one of the brand's key components – the express 30-minute

KEY ACTIONS

- 1 Conduct research among your members, staff and suppliers to build up a picture of your club's unique qualities. Discover what your club stands for.
- 2 Identify and understand where the needs of new and existing members are not being met.
- 3 Develop a market position that's clear, distinctive and attractive.
- 4 Ensure all your marketing activities synchronise with your market position. Be bold and change those things that conflict with and undermine it.
- 5 Ensure that you measure your club's actions against your market position.



Where do you stand? Work out what your club stands for and create a clear, distinctive, attractive market position

once you've found your club's unique qualities, make them impossible to imitate

circuit – to counter what most women lack: time. And 30 minutes means just that, as women arrive ready to exercise and there are no showers, sunbeds or saunas to use afterwards.

The clubs are also easy to access. At around 140sq m (1,500sq ft), the clubs can also be put almost anywhere. Significantly, this means that clubs can return to the high street, allowing women to integrate a Curves workout around other daily activities. Curves also sells short courses, rather than a long contract with a notice period, making the buying decision uncomplicated. With all circuit sessions run by instructors, this 'no frills' health club has struck a real chord with women in more than 41 countries.

distinctive qualities

Now let's look at the fictitious Third Wave Club that focuses on people who are 50+ and seeking a health and well-being experience. Third Wave's positioning

statement is: 'Adding active and enjoyable years to the lives of our members.'

Every single aspect of the member journey supports its market position. Notice how the club emphasises adding active and enjoyable years. Medical advancements are undoubtedly helping to add years to life, but adding enjoyable life to years is the real challenge. The Third Wave Club is for people who want a full, active and experience-rich life as they age. Consequently everything – from club design to marketing communications, equipment selection, class programmes and staff recruitment – supports its market position. However, it will be the attitude and actions of the Third Wave staff that will ultimately determine the long-term success of the club.

You may find the following process useful for synchronising your market position with your club's values and ultimately the way you interact with prospective and existing members.

- Brand value: what unequivocally defines the essence of your club and affects everything you do?
- Market position: creating a clear, distinctive, attractive market position in the minds of prospective members
- Manifestations: the physical evidence that supports your business values and market position
- Staff actions: the behaviour of employees with prospective and existing members
- Measurement: the ways you check that you are practising what you preach

If your club doesn't have any distinctive qualities, create one! Discover two or three things your club does really well, then galvanise your team to make one of those features the best it can possibly be. Flaunt it at every opportunity and be proud of it. Ensure that it is impossibly difficult for a rival to imitate, compelling to members and staff, and consistent with your club vision.

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