



## Positioning Strategies of Universities: An Investigation on Universities in Istanbul

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify positioning strategies in which universities want to be distinctive in the mind of prospective students. For this purpose, the research was designed in the case study pattern by using qualitative methodology. The population of the research includes the universities in Istanbul. Purposive sampling was used and the universities that had put their promotional videos on their web pages, were investigated. The research data were obtained by typing the written and verbal statements in the promotional videos. The data were analyzed by using content analysis. In conclusion, eight positioning strategies pursued by the universities were defined. Furthermore, the research indicated that there were some differences in positioning strategies between public and foundation universities. Finally, the positioning map was generated for the universities which were included in the research. Public and private universities wishing to create a different image from their competitors are recommended to benefit from the positioning map.

### Keywords

Positioning  
Positioning strategies  
University  
Promotional movie  
Istanbul

### Article Info

Received: 25.04.2013  
Accepted: 27.01.2016  
Online Published: 21.03.2016

DOI: 10.15390/EB.2016.2723

### Introduction

Universities once thought far of competition. It did not occur to them that one day they will have to compete fiercely for getting the scarce resources which they used to access effortlessly. As competition among universities has increased, so has the application of marketing in the field of higher education (Harrison, 2009). Marketing activities carried out by universities target prospective students, staff, shareholders, and other stakeholders of the university (Carvalho & de Oliveira Mota, 2010; Chapleo, 2005; Ivy, 2001). Universities create a distinct image for gaining a competitive advantage and better access to financial sources other than the state, in an increasingly competitive environment (Mount & Belanger, 2004). Distinctive images may increase number of students who are willing to enroll the university, the number of donors and the amount donation, and the number of the companies that are willing to cooperate with the university for research and development projects (Ivy, 2001). However, prospective students and staff are prior targets of the universities because of the fact that university awareness depends on the quality of its research and education (Chapleo, 2005; Carvalho & de Oliveira Mota, 2010; Günay, 2006). Furthermore, universities deserve financial support from state, research funding, and private donations as a result of their generating, teaching, and

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disseminating activities of information made by the students and staff in the university. In this context, it can be said that the objectives of the marketing activities of a university are firstly to attract qualified students and academics to the university, and secondly, to receive more financial support from the state, research funding, and private donations (Beneke, 2010).

Positioning is one of the most important marketing activities for universities (Erdal, 2001). Moreover, positioning is widely accepted as the essence of branding activities (Ries & Trout, 1981). The way to build a powerful brand is to distinguish it from its competitors. The best way to do that is to position the brand distinctively via its personality and identity (Kapferer, 2008). In this context, the purpose of this paper is to identify whether or not universities apply positioning strategies which differ from their competitors, and if they do, to conceptualize those positioning strategies. Furthermore, determining the positioning maps of universities in Istanbul and whether there are differences between the positioning strategies of the foundation and public universities, are also discussed in this paper. The paper provides two important contributions to the theory and practice. The first, is to identify and conceptualize the positioning strategies which can be engaged by the universities. The second is the creation of the positioning map which enables universities to review their existing strategy and if necessary, to generate a new positioning strategy.

### *Literature Review*

Positioning is a process of affecting consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and consumption habits in accordance with competitive conditions and company facilities in the target market (Doğanlı, 2006). The aim of positioning is to identify, and take possession of, a strong purchasing rationale that gives us a real or perceived advantage and to keep it. Positioning is the act of designing to get a distinct image according to competitors in the customer's mind, based on its distinctive characteristics (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Positioning results from an analytical process based on the four following questions: a brand / product for whom, what benefit, what reason, and against whom (Kapferer, 2008).

The positioning is often the crucial strategic decision which is the source of the competitive advantage for a firm or a brand because the position can be central to customers' perception and decisions (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2007). The communication strategy of a firm is based on its positioning strategy. Some organizations try to create an image for themselves as everything to everyone through their positioning strategy. This might lead to a confused perception in consumers' minds. Additionally, perceived uniqueness (a particular position associated with only one brand), strength (a strong and clear association with the position), and prevalence (whereby the targeted customers are aware of the brand's position) are required for effective positioning (Harrison, 2009). Companies should develop a position before making decision about marketing communication activities because of the fact that the positioning will affect all components of the marketing communication. The positioning is the source of coherence for marketing activities to be carried out. A clear position ensures that all components of the marketing communication support each other (Aaker & Shansby, 1982).

The management and the marketing of the services are discussed differently from physical goods in the literature (Öztürk, 2006). Ellis and Mosher (1993) argued that the unique characteristics of the services (intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, perishability, and non-standardization) should be taken into the consideration in the process of developing positioning strategy. Furthermore, Jo Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert, and Zeithaml (1997) asserted that there was no need to develop different positioning strategies for brands of physical goods or services because of several overlaps between the physical goods and the services alongside the natural differences. However, Blankson and Kalafatis (2007) pointed out that positioning the service brands is more difficult and challenging than the physical goods brands because of features of the services such as intangibility, heterogeneity and non-standardization. Service brands may apply the same position strategy with the goods brands by making the necessary changes according to characteristics of the services.