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I write about great brands and their strategies.

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Donald Trump Shows Brands How to De-Position Competitors

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Like him or not, you have to admit [Donald Trump](#) has caused his competitors for the 2016 presidential bid to scramble. He's done what many brands aspire to do — he's captured the spotlight, shaken up the category, and knocked previous leaders back on their heels.

In effect, Trump has de-positioned competitors — that is, he's re-framed the category and shifted the competitive positioning of its major players. And again, whether or not you like his tactics and whether or not they will ultimately help him win, his approach shows how to de-position your competitors.



Credit: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Take an extreme position. Trump's positions on immigration, foreign policy, corporate taxes, and other hot topics are far right of most conservatives. His brash style and bold tone are also far from the standard.

As such, he has made other presidential hopefuls like [Rand Paul](#) and [Ted Cruz](#), who had previously positioned themselves as bold and convention-breaking, seem quite moderate.

Brands can de-position competitors by taking an extreme position. You can make your competitors seem bland or milktoast by staking out an exaggerated position and saliently promoting it. Remember Hummer? Back in the early 90's SUVs were all the rage and brands such as Jeep and Ford appealed to customers by promoting their toughness and ruggedness. Then, Hummer came onto the market with huge models designed to look like military trucks and it made all other SUVs look small and dainty in comparison.

Call out your competitors. Trump has boldly declared he is the only candidate with the ability to beat [Hillary Clinton](#). And he names names when criticizing his competitors, saying [Rick Perry](#) did an “absolutely terrible” job securing Texas’ border and the “last thing we need is another Bush.” With these bold statements, Trump is claiming clear superiority and challenging his competitors directly.

In the business world, there may be important reasons why brands shouldn't name their competitors but calling them out remains an viable and important option. It's what Wendy's did when it ran its “Where's the Beef” campaign. Showing three grandmas examining a new burger with a tiny patty and a huge bun was a sharp competitive jab. Wendy's didn't mention any competitors by name — the burger was from an unnamed restaurant, the “Home of the Big Bun” — but everyone knew it was a competitive challenge directly aimed at Burger King and McDonald's.

Use competitors' leadership against them. The way Trump positions it, the presumed leaders in the presidential race including [Jeb Bush](#) and Hillary Clinton are their own worst enemies. He's said they are part of the “mess” America is in today and therefore they can't be part of the solution. He blames them for their strong ties to donors, lobbyists, and the political system in general, while touting his own independence.

Making your competitors' leadership unattractive is an effective way to de-position them. A corollary is to use your own perceived “weakness” as an advantage. Think about how powerful Avis' “We Try Harder” campaign was against Hertz. Also, back when Fox television network was getting started, it was able to steal share from the Big Three networks because it could run quirky, groundbreaking programming that would have alienated the broad audiences of larger networks.

Change the conversation. When Trump announced his candidacy, he drew the spotlight not only to himself but also to the topic of immigration. It's unclear whether or not he increased the frequency of conversation in the media about immigration, but he certainly increased its emotional fervor. And he focused the terminology on “illegal” vs. “undocumented” immigrant.

Brands can also change the conversation in their categories, usually by introducing a new feature or benefit or making an existing one much more salient. Method home products became so popular so quickly because it was the first brand of home-care products in beautifully designed bottles and packages. Previously, brands in the category were positioned on efficacy; Method made people care about the way products in the category looked as well. More recently, Uber introduced the concept of personal, seamless experience into the conversation about transportation.

Getting your positioning right is a critical element of an effective brand strategy. As Trump has demonstrated, oftentimes positioning your brand is as much about staking out your ground as it is about de-positioning your competitors.

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