

Half-Strategy, Whole Risk:
The Positioning Mistake That
Is Costing You Business.



THE BRIEFING IN BRIEF

Most agencies, consultancies, and studios believe they have a strategy. In truth, they only have half of one.

Take a break and have a look at only a dozen or so websites of consultancies and agencies (perhaps your competitors) and you'll spot an interesting, but not surprising pattern. They all more or less express the a similar positioning. It's a bit ironic, as so many of them include brand strategy and positioning as part of their services.

But there is another problem going on as well. While most companies can tell you "where they play" (the space) but they can't tell you why clients should choose them specifically inside their space. They define themselves through category labels, leaving clients asking: Why you? Why now? What outcomes can you actually deliver?

This “strategy gap” is costing firms revenue, margins, and long-term relevance.



THE ISSUE

Telling prospects "what you do" through a category description leaves clients wondering why they should choose you.

The Missing Half Of Strategy

Roger Martin's amazing strategy classic *Playing to Win* boils strategy down to two deceptively simple questions:

Where do you play?

How do you win?

Most firms can answer the first. Very few can answer the second.

They'll say things like:

"We build brands."

"We transform businesses."

"We connect companies with audiences."

Nice words, but meaningless in practice. It's like a US football team saying: "We play in the NFL." Great — but are you winning with speed, defense, nurturing talent, or buying superstars?

The Brutal Cost of Generic Positioning

When you only define where you play, you sound like every other firm in your category.

Brand agencies that "create meaningful connections."

Consultancies that "drive transformation."

Digital shops that "combine creativity with technology."

It's wallpaper. Buyers stop listening. Research shows that 50% of B2B brands are so undifferentiated that buyers confuse them with competitors — meaning your marketing budget could literally be building someone else's pipeline.

Once buyers perceive firms as interchangeable, they default to the lowest price. And once you're competing on price, the game is already lost.

INSIGHT

Playing too broad might feel safe, but it's actually riskier than focusing on fewer ideal clients.

Why Professional Services Struggle With “How You Win”

Roger Martin’s research shows most companies mistake planning for strategy. They make sensible-sounding initiatives with price tags, but no integrated set of choices that actually shape competitive advantage.

Professional services are especially vulnerable:

They’re terrified of saying no to opportunities.

They believe broader = safer.

They confuse activity with advantage.

Personally, I have lived this reality. It's hard to get out of it, especially if you need cashflow to make payroll. It's like a negative spiral. But when you have good cash, you can afford to stay on position.

What “How You Win” Looks Like

The firms who close the gap know exactly where their edge lies.

Unique process or philosophy

→ “We strip brands down to a single sharp sentence before we build them back up.”

Distinct talent or expertise

→ “We only hire journalists to do content strategy, so everything we write actually gets read.”

Outcome obsession

→ “We don’t just design brands, we design them to sell at a higher multiple in three years, and we have proof.”

IDEA

The litmus test?

Within the space where you play, ask yourself:

Why should they choose us?

The Two Ways You Can Actually Win

According to Martin, there are only two sustainable ways to win:

Be the lowest-cost provider.

→ Rare in professional services, almost impossible to scale with talent-based businesses.

Be meaningfully differentiated.

→ Clear, sharp, and defensible.

Side note: It was Michael Porter who first created this theory, although Martin talks about it (for good reason).

Test yourself:

Could you withstand a competitor cutting prices and remain profitable? If not, you're not low-cost.

Could buyers flip a coin between you and a competitor? If yes, you're not differentiated.

The Litmus Test: Why Should They Choose You?

At the end of the day, every client and customer is asking one simple question:

“Why should I choose you?”

Your positioning determines whether you're seen as:

One choice among many (undifferentiated, competing on price)

One choice among few (specialized, relevant, credible)

The only choice (the obvious partner for a specific audience or need)

To be the chosen one, you don't need to be everything. You need to be the most relevant to a specific audience's needs, wants, and tastes.

That means making hard choices: narrowing your focus, simplifying your message, and aligning everything you do around the clients who matter most.

CONCLUSION

Make bolder, sharper choices.
Say no to the wrong clients,
focus on creating outstanding
value for the right ones.
Become their only viable choice.

The Financial Impact of Getting This Right

Firms with strong, differentiated positioning see measurable impact:

10–23% higher revenue growth from consistent positioning.

90% of B2B deals go to “known” (positioned) vendors.

Premium pricing power — less discounting, more margin.

Stronger client loyalty & LTV — because clients know why they chose you.

Differentiation doesn’t just make you look better. It makes you more profitable, more defensible, and more valuable.

Closing the Strategy Gap

If your firm can only say where it plays, you don’t have a strategy — you have a category label.

Closing the gap means:

Making sharper choices.

Saying no to work that doesn’t fit.

Defining not just what you do, but how you do it better, faster, or more distinctively than anyone else.

Once you can articulate this clearly, everything changes:

You stop competing on price.

You start competing on value.

Buyers finally have a reason to choose you.

The question is: will you remain a “choiceless doer” in a commoditized market, or will you make the choices that create a true competitive advantage?

Takeaway

👉 Most agencies and consultancies lose deals not because of bad work, but because of half a strategy.

Don’t just tell me where you play.

Tell me how you win.



ORIGINAL MINDS®

Original Minds is a collective and community for curious, creative, and bold leaders and visionaries in the world of marketing, branding, and creative businesses - from creative entrepreneurs and agency owners to CMO's, brand-builders, and independent consultants and freelancers.

Through our frameworks like SimpleOS™, we help you redesign your operating system with AI at the core—so you can scale smarter, protect margins, and focus on the high-value creative work that sets you apart.

- 🔗 Learn more: www.originalminds.co
- 🔗 Learn more: www.originalminds.co/membership

Email: hello@originalminds.co

© 2025 Original Minds. All rights reserved.
Original Minds® and SimpleOS™ are registered trademarks of Original Minds. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations in reviews or articles.

Disclaimer:
This whitepaper is provided for informational purposes only and is not intended as legal, financial, or professional advice. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information herein, Original Minds makes no representations or warranties, express or implied. You should not act or rely on any information contained in this document without first seeking independent professional advice. Original Minds shall not be held liable for any loss, damage, or business interruption resulting from the use of or reliance on the information provided.

Tobias Dahlberg

Tobias is a strategist, entrepreneur, and nine-time founder of professional service firms. He is the founder of Original Minds® and The Simple Company®

He founded and managed a brand consultancy for almost 15 years., and since 2020, he has advised hundreds of agency owners and other marketing and creative entrepreneurs.

His work has been featured in publications, such as Wallpaper Magazine, Condé Nast Traveler, Centurion Magazine, Business Insider, and more.

He lives in Helsinki, Finland with his wife and two daughters.

The Brief.

The Brief™ is a daily(ish) newsletter and online publication bringing you insights, ideas, provocations, and valuable resources to fuel your path as an agency owner, brand-builder, CMO, consultant, or freelancer.

✉️ Subscribe to The Brief: media.originalminds.co