Positioning Strategies of Financial Services Firms in Ghana: A Case Study Approach

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Background & Purpose

While there is a wide variety of research inquiry into positioning (Arnott, 1992; Hooley et al., 1998; Bingne, Vila-Lopez and Kuster-Boluda, 2000; Suzuki, 2000; Miles and Mangold, 2005; d’Astous and Boujbel, 2007), examinations of managerial positioning-related views and activities as well as external observations of these activities appear to be missing in positioning research (Ries and Trout, 1986; Hooley, Saunders, and Piercy, 2004). Additionally, the focus of prior positioning studies on quantitative methods is restrictive given the pivotal impact of day-to-day, non-quantitative firm activities on the operationalization of positioning strategies (Ries and Trout, 1986; Porter, 1996). Despite incessant calls from practitioners (Ries and Trout, 1986) and scholars (Hooley et al., 2004), qualitative case study research in positioning appears to have been overlooked, including in the positioning domain.

Given this research gap, the central purpose of this exploratory research is to examine the employment of positioning strategies of Ghanaian financial services firms using a qualitative case study approach, which is in line with Jarratt and Fayed’s (2001) method in their examination of the link between marketing strategy development and strategic decision-making. Qualitative methods are valuable in that, unlike quantitative methods, they can uncover underlying motivations and efforts important in the application of marketing strategies (e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Cayla and Arnould, 2008). Additionally, this study attempts to respond to Kalra and Goodstein (1998), who suggest that future research should examine positioning strategies, and adds to the meager research stream attempting to document the positioning strategies pursued by actual firms in developing countries, specifically in the fruitful emerging economy of Ghana (Coffie and Owusu-Frimpong, 2014; Coffie, 2014). Seven case studies are examined in this
research (Quality Insurance Company, uniBank Ghana, Barclays Bank Ghana, Standard Chartered Bank Ghana, Energy Bank Ghana, Fidelity Bank, and ARB Apex Bank) and are specifically used as illustrations of the pursuit of positioning strategies. The findings are analyzed and presented below, concluding with implications and directions for future research.

**Research Method**

Although qualitative methods have been criticized (Cooper and Schindler, 2001), scholars have lamented the lack of qualitative research in the marketing discipline (Gummesson, 2001), which has been partially addressed through recent qualitative works (e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Goodwin et al., 1997; Brooksbank et al., 2003; Brady and Cronin, 2001; de Chernatony and Cottam, 2009). Qualitative case study research can offer unique insight into positioning (e.g., Dubois and Gadde, 2002; de Chernatony and Cottam, 2009), which is important when examining developing economies such as Ghana (Suzuki, 2000; Jarratt and Fayed, 2001).

In this study, at least one senior manager from each firm was interviewed concerning marketing practices (e.g., Lewin and Johnston, 1997; de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1999; de Chernatony and Cottam, 2009). Each interview lasted 40 to 45 minutes, took place in non-contrived settings, and was recorded with permission. Additionally, we utilized observation techniques (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) to assess positioning activities, including service, ambience, marketing collateral, appearance/façade, and staff mannerisms. This assessment permitted acquaintance with the outward evidence of positioning strategies (Ries and Trout, 1986; Blankson et al., 2008). Comparison of the observations with the interviews permitted a better understanding of overall positioning activities in each firm (Jarratt and Fayed, 2001; Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

**Measurement Construct**

The authors adopted an empirically-based generic (i.e., appropriate for services and goods),
consumer-derived typology of positioning strategies (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004; see Table 1) given the prior criticisms of extant typologies (Kalafatis et al., 2000) due to the absence of empirically-derived, consumer-generated positioning strategies (Aaker and Shansby, 1982; Crawford, 1985; Ries and Trout, 1986). The selection of this typology is justified by Eisenhardt’s (1989) recommendation to adopt a priori constructs for emerging theory.

**Table 1 - Typology of Positioning Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy 1</th>
<th>Top of the range: Upper class, top of the range, status, prestigious, posh</th>
<th>Strategy 5</th>
<th>Attractiveness: Good aesthetics, Attractive, Cool, Elegant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 2</td>
<td>Service: Impressive service, personal attention, consider people as important, friendly service</td>
<td>Strategy 6</td>
<td>Country of origin: Patriotism, Country of origin, Youth market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 3</td>
<td>Value for money: Reasonable price, Value for money, Affordability</td>
<td>Strategy 7</td>
<td>Branding: The brand name, Leaders in the market, extra features, choice, wide range, expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 4</td>
<td>Reliability: Durability, Warranty, Safety, Reliability</td>
<td>Strategy 8</td>
<td>Selectivity: Discriminatory in selection of customers, Selective in choice of customers, high principles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Validity and Reliability*

We adopted the above typology (Table 1), developed in the United Kingdom after validation tests in Ghana, prior to the final data collection (Douglas and Craig, 2005). The validation tests involved assessment of the properties and meaning underpinning the typology in those sectors. The latter was carried out through face-to-face interviews with a convenience sample of forty-five executives from the services and manufacturing industries in Ghana, consistent with Si and Bruton (2005). Additionally, three academic experts were asked to make suggestions which were subsequently incorporated into the research. Finally, three types of tests were conducted to establish reliability and validity (Sweeney & Chews, 2002; Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

*Findings & Discussion*

Consistent with practices established and suggested in the literature (Lewin and Johnston, 1997; de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1999; Dubois and Gadde, 2002; de Chernatony and
Cottam, 2009), based on the interviews and observations, we indicate the pertinent positioning strategies (see Table 1) believed to be employed by the sampled firms (see Brady and Cronin, 2001; Jarratt and Fayed, 2001). The results (Table 2) show that the selected firms have strategically employed positioning strategies by addressing customer needs and seeking to improve firm performance (i.e., profitability and shareholder earnings).

### Table 2 - Positioning Strategies of Selected Ghanaian Financial Services Firms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm Name</th>
<th>Top of the Range</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Value for Money</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Attractiveness</th>
<th>Brand Name</th>
<th>Selectivity</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
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<td>uniBank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barclays</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard Chartered Bank</td>
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<td>Energy Bank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fidelity Bank</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARB Apex Bank</td>
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</table>

All sampled firms pursue a few common goals: “service” as a positioning strategy, tangibilization of offerings, and the maximization of profitability and shareholder earnings. Despite these common goals, the sampled firms appear to have used positioning strategies to differentiate themselves from one another and find unique places in the market. While the results can be read and compared by the reader, a few interesting findings are evident. For example, four of the five firms pursuing “value for money” are also the four firms pursuing “attractiveness.” Does this apparent relationship explain the reason why firms pursuing “top of the range” fail to employ “attractiveness?” Do firms with strong, appealing ambience attract lower-end consumers but not higher-end consumers? Additionally, only three firms pursue “reliability,” which seems counterintuitive given the security and assurance that consumers desire in financial services. Finally, none of the sampled firms seem to pursue “selectivity.” While a few firms pursue “top of the range”, these firms seek to appeal to a broad range of consumers of various personal and
financial backgrounds. Would pursuing “selectivity” improve the efficiency and effectiveness of firms with high-end customers? These and other questions should be explored through future research.

**Conclusion**

This research contributes to marketing theory with Ghana as the study setting and also supports other research on the reliability and validity of Blankson and Kalafatis’s (2004) typology of positioning strategies. Managers should ensure use of the tactics of product/service attractiveness and customer value to maintain favorable customer impressions. Firms looking to enter the Ghanaian market can use these findings to determine an optimal entrance strategy based on a solid positioning-related foundation. Finally, managers should proactively emphasize pursued positioning strategies in marketing communications while ensuring that efforts are consistent with perceptions of intended target markets (Hooley, Piercy, and Nicoulaud, 2012).

**Limitations and Future Research**

Given the limited nature of qualitative, exploratory studies, the positioning strategies above cannot be assuredly and empirically tied to business performance outcomes for these firms. However, these findings can be used as a basis for a more thorough research study. Future research should expand the small sample size to include ample representation of Ghanaian financial services firms. Additionally, the results are limited to positioning strategies as pursued by Ghanaian financial services firms, so future research should examine additional Ghanaian services contexts. Through the pursuit of these and other research avenues, scholastic and managerial understanding of positioning and its influence on performance will be enhanced, both in Ghana and beyond.

**References**

References are available upon request.