Positioning and Messaging in an Agent-Readable World

Pragmatic Remix: Positioning • Messaging • Buyer Personas • Use Cases • Buying Process

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We want to tell you about two companies that sell roughly the same thing. Both offer enterprise data platforms. Both serve Fortune 500 customers. Both have strong engineering teams and credible analyst coverage. One of them—let's call them Company A—built their platform natively over fifteen years. The data fabric, the analytics engine, the planning tools, the AI layer —all designed to work together from the ground up, sharing a common semantic model and a unified governance framework. The other—Company B—assembled their platform through a series of acquisitions over five years. They bought a data warehouse company, a BI company, a data integration company, and an AI startup, then stitched them together with APIs and a unified brand and a marketing narrative about "one platform."

In the traditional buying process—the one where a human evaluation committee spends three months comparing vendors—both companies could compete effectively. Company B's sales team was polished. Their demo was carefully choreographed to hide the seams between acquired products. Their positioning emphasized breadth: "everything you need, one vendor, one contract." And it worked, because the human buyers were evaluating at the level of narrative and relationship and perceived risk reduction. They weren't parsing the technical architecture; they were responding to the story.

Then the agents showed up.

Here's what an agent does when a procurement team asks it to evaluate enterprise data platforms. It reads the documentation—all of it, not the curated demo path but the full technical docs, the API reference, the integration guides, the knowledge base articles. It notices that Company B's documentation references three different authentication models across three acquired products. It notices that the "unified semantic model" described on the marketing page doesn't match the technical reality described in the integration guides, where data moving between the acquired BI tool and the acquired data warehouse requires an ETL step that the marketing materials don't mention. It notices that the "one platform" positioning is contradicted by the support documentation, which has separate troubleshooting paths for each acquired component.

The agent doesn't care that Company B's sales team is charming. It doesn't care about the golf outing or the steak dinner or the executive sponsor who went to college with the prospect's CTO. It cares about structural coherence—whether the technical architecture matches the

marketing claims—because structural coherence is what it can evaluate at scale with high confidence. And on that dimension, Company A wins every time.

This is what we mean by "acquisition as confession." When a company acquires five products to build a platform, they're implicitly confessing that they didn't have the capability natively—and in an agent-mediated buying process, that confession is legible in the technical documentation even if it's invisible in the marketing narrative.

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We're not telling this story to pick on any specific vendor—though if you've spent time in the enterprise data space, you can probably map Company A and Company B to real companies. We're telling it because it illustrates the most important thing that's changing about positioning in the agentic era: your positioning now has two audiences, and they evaluate it differently.

The Dual-Audience Problem

For as long as product marketing has existed, positioning has been a human-persuasion exercise. You write positioning to change how a person thinks about your product relative to alternatives. April Dunford's work—which is excellent, and which we'd recommend to any PMM who hasn't read *Obviously Awesome*—frames positioning as a deliberate act of contextualizing your product so that its value becomes obvious to the right buyer. That framing assumes a human buyer who processes information through narrative, analogy, social proof, and emotional resonance.

That assumption is no longer sufficient. Your positioning now needs to work for two audiences simultaneously.

Audience one is the human decision-maker—the CMO, the CTO, the VP of Data Engineering, whoever signs the contract. This audience still responds to narrative, still cares about brand, still wants to feel like they're making a smart choice that they can defend to their board. The human buyer hasn't disappeared. But they're increasingly making their decision based on a shortlist that was pre-filtered by audience two.

Audience two is the agent. The AI system that the buying organization has tasked with evaluating vendors, comparing capabilities, assessing technical fit, and producing a recommendation. This audience doesn't respond to narrative. It responds to structured information, consistent claims, verifiable evidence, and technical coherence. It doesn't care that you won a Gartner Leader position—unless the specific evaluation criteria in the Gartner report are relevant to the buyer's stated requirements, in which case it cares about the criteria, not the badge.

The dual-audience problem creates a tension that most PMMs haven't grappled with yet. Traditional positioning advice says to lead with the business outcome: "don't sell the drill, sell the hole." That's great advice for the human buyer. But the agent isn't evaluating whether you sell the hole effectively—it's evaluating whether your drill actually makes the hole. It wants specifications, integration capabilities, performance benchmarks, architectural details. It wants the receipt, not the promise.

What Agents Actually Read

We spent a couple of weeks running an experiment that we think every PMM should replicate. We took the positioning pages—the main product marketing pages, not the documentation—from ten enterprise software companies and ran them through Claude with a simple prompt: "You are an AI procurement agent evaluating data platform vendors for a mid-market manufacturing company. Based on this page, assess this vendor's fit for the following requirements." Then we listed five specific, technical requirements—data integration from ERP systems, real-time analytics, predictive planning capabilities, role-based access control, and multi-cloud deployment support.

The results were revealing. About half of the product pages—the ones written in traditional marketing language, heavy on vision and light on specifics—produced agent evaluations full of qualifications: "The vendor appears to offer analytics capabilities but the page does not specify whether these are real-time." "Multi-cloud deployment is not explicitly confirmed; the language suggests cloud availability but does not enumerate supported platforms." The agent was essentially saying: *I can't evaluate this vendor because the marketing page doesn't give me enough structured information to work with.*
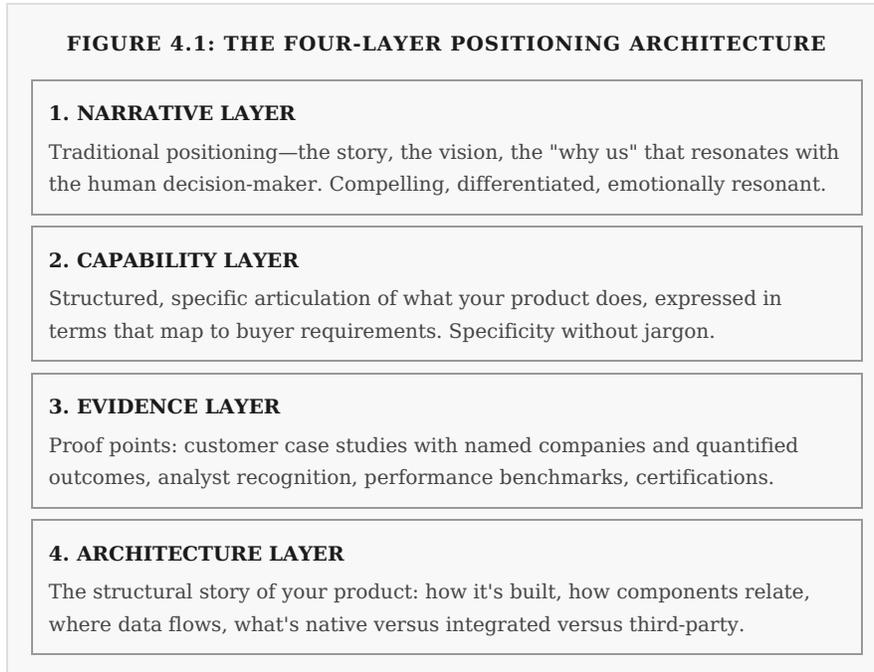
The other half—the pages that included specific capabilities, named integrations, architecture diagrams, and explicit statements about what the product does and doesn't do—produced clean, confident evaluations. The agent could map capabilities to requirements, identify gaps, and provide a clear recommendation. These pages weren't less compelling to humans; many of them were well-written and even narratively engaging. They just also happened to be specific.

The lesson isn't "write for robots." The lesson is that vague positioning—the kind that sounds great in a keynote but doesn't actually say what the product does—has always been a weakness, and agents are about to expose it at scale. Every PMM who has ever written "unlock actionable insights from your data" without specifying what kind of data, what kind of insights, and what "actionable" actually means in the context of the customer's workflow is about to discover that their positioning is invisible to the fastest-growing segment of their buyer base.

The Positioning Architecture

So what does good positioning look like in an agent-mediated world? We think it has four layers, and the trick is that each layer serves a different function and a different audience.

FIGURE 4.1: THE FOUR-LAYER POSITIONING ARCHITECTURE

1. NARRATIVE LAYER

Traditional positioning—the story, the vision, the "why us" that resonates with the human decision-maker. Compelling, differentiated, emotionally resonant.

2. CAPABILITY LAYER

Structured, specific articulation of what your product does, expressed in terms that map to buyer requirements. Specificity without jargon.

3. EVIDENCE LAYER

Proof points: customer case studies with named companies and quantified outcomes, analyst recognition, performance benchmarks, certifications.

4. ARCHITECTURE LAYER

The structural story of your product: how it's built, how components relate, where data flows, what's native versus integrated versus third-party.

Layer one is the narrative layer. This is traditional positioning—the story, the vision, the "why us" that resonates with the human decision-maker. It's April Dunford territory. It should be compelling, differentiated, and emotionally resonant. It's what makes a CMO think "these are my people." Nothing about the agentic era diminishes the importance of this layer. If anything, it matters more, because the human decision-maker is going to encounter your narrative later in the buying process—after the agent has already shortlisted you—and the narrative is what tips the decision from "qualified vendor" to "preferred partner."

Layer two is the capability layer. This is the structured, specific articulation of what your product does, expressed in terms that map to buyer requirements. It's not a feature list—it's a capability framework that says: for this type of use case, our product provides this capability, integrated with these systems, supporting these workflows, at this scale. This is the layer that agents parse most effectively, and it's the layer that most marketing pages get wrong by being either too vague or too technical. The sweet spot is specificity without jargon: "Native bidirectional integration with SAP S/4HANA, Salesforce, and Workday for real-time data synchronization" is specific enough for an agent and clear enough for a human. "Seamless enterprise integration across your technology ecosystem" is neither.

Layer three is the evidence layer. This is where you substantiate your

positioning with proof points: customer case studies with named companies and quantified outcomes, analyst recognition with the specific evaluation criteria that drove it, performance benchmarks, security certifications, integration partnerships. Agents weight evidence heavily because it's verifiable—they can cross-reference your claimed G2 rating against the actual G2 page, they can check whether the analyst report you cite actually says what you claim it says. The evidence layer is where intellectual honesty pays off and where exaggeration gets caught.

Layer four is the architecture layer. This is the one that most PMMs don't think of as positioning, but it's increasingly the most important layer for technical buyers and the agents that serve them. It's the structural story of your product: how it's built, how the components relate to each other, where data flows, what's native versus integrated versus third-party. This is where the "acquisition as confession" dynamic plays out—an agent reading your architecture documentation can tell whether your platform is genuinely integrated or bolted together, and that assessment shapes everything downstream.

Killing the Vague Value Proposition

We have a confession of our own: we have written vague value propositions. Plenty of them. In the DMP era, we wrote things like "unlock the power of data-driven marketing" and "deliver the right message at the right time." Those phrases tested well in focus groups and looked great on a slide. They also said exactly nothing. They were marketing air—words arranged in a pattern that sounded meaningful but conveyed no information that could differentiate one vendor from another.

The agentic era is going to kill vague value propositions, and honestly, good riddance. When an agent is comparing five vendors on behalf of a buyer, it needs to evaluate each vendor against specific criteria. "Unlock actionable insights" doesn't map to any criteria. "Real-time anomaly detection across supply chain data with automated alerting and root-cause analysis" maps to several. The first is a wish. The second is a capability. Agents deal in capabilities.

This doesn't mean your positioning should read like a spec sheet. The narrative layer still matters—humans still buy from humans, and the agent is filtering, not deciding. But it does mean that every claim in your positioning needs to be backed by a specific capability, and every capability needs to be findable, parseable, and verifiable. If an agent can't find evidence that you actually do the thing you claim to do, you're invisible to that agent. And invisible to the agent increasingly means invisible to the buyer.

The Practitioner's Playbook: Positioning for Two Audiences

Here's what we'd tell any PMM working on positioning right now.

First, run the agent test on your own product pages. Take your main product marketing page and feed it to Claude or ChatGPT with a prompt that simulates an agent evaluation: "You are evaluating this vendor for [specific use case] with these requirements: [list five to seven concrete requirements]. Based only on this page, assess the vendor's fit." If the agent comes back with a confident, accurate assessment, your positioning is working. If it comes back hedging—"the vendor appears to offer X but this is not explicitly confirmed"—you have a specificity gap.

Second, audit your documentation for consistency. One of the most damaging things we see—and we've seen it at every company we've worked at, including our own—is a disconnect between what the marketing page says and what the technical documentation says. Marketing says "unified platform." The docs describe three separate configuration workflows. Marketing says "real-time analytics." The docs describe a batch-processing pipeline with a fifteen-minute refresh interval. Agents will find these inconsistencies, and they will interpret them as credibility problems. A PMM who owns the documentation experience—not just the marketing page—is going to outperform a PMM who doesn't.

Third, build your positioning from the capability layer up, not the narrative layer down. The traditional approach is to start with the story— the vision, the differentiation, the "why"—and then figure out how to support it with proof points. We're suggesting the reverse. Start with the specific capabilities your product actually delivers. Map those capabilities to buyer use cases. Quantify the outcomes where you can. Then write the narrative layer on top of that foundation. The positioning will be more specific, more defensible, and more effective for both audiences—because it's grounded in what's real rather than what sounds good.

THE CMO PERSPECTIVE

Positioning is the activity where the gap between what PMMs produce and what the business needs is widest—and the agentic era is making that gap more visible. Strong positioning should serve multiple contexts with the same core narrative: winning a deal, briefing an analyst, defending a pricing decision, informing a product roadmap conversation. If the positioning only works for one of those, it's a messaging document for a specific audience, not positioning.

The four-layer framework—narrative, capability, evidence, architecture— maps to how CMOs evaluate quality. When positioning has all four layers, the work has been done. When it's strong on narrative but thin on capability and evidence, someone did the fun part and skipped the hard part. One practice we've adopted: positioning reviews now include a documentation check. If we claim a capability on the marketing page, the documentation page must support it. In an agent-mediated buying process, documentation consistency may be the highest-leverage

positioning activity you can do.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Positioning must be multi-context:** usable across deals, analyst briefings, pricing defense, and roadmap conversations.

- **The four-layer test**—narrative, capability, evidence, architecture—is a practical quality gate for positioning documents.

- **Agent-mediated buyers evaluate documentation,** not just marketing pages—consistency between the two is critical.

- **Run a documentation audit:** if your marketing claims aren't backed by product docs, agents will notice the gap before human buyers do.