

Brand positioning of domestic services in Australia

Vladimir Zhechev*, University of Economics-Varna, 77 Knyaz Boris I Blvd., Varna 9002, Bulgaria.

Evgeni Stanimirov, University of Economics-Varna, 77 Knyaz Boris I Blvd., Varna 9002, Bulgaria.

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Abstract

The purpose of this article (as part of a larger study) is to develop and apply a methodology for analysing and assessing the competitive position of the Fantastic Services Australia (FSA) brand in the surveyed country (and the major regional domestic services markets—Melbourne and Sydney). Based on scientifically grounded analysis, theoretical ideas and exploration of FSA markets, the paper highlights some marketing prospects for the company and draws conclusions and guidelines for building an appropriate positioning strategy for the respective regions and types of services (end of lease cleaning, carpet cleaning and one-off cleaning). FSA is one of the largest market players, both in terms of scale and network of franchisees, and this coupled with the intensive rivalry it faces further elucidates the need for carefully calibrated brand positioning to maintain competitive edge.

Keywords: Brand positioning, positioning strategy, domestic services.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Vladimir Zhechev**, University of Economics-Varna, 77 Knyaz Boris I Blvd., Varna 9002, Bulgaria. E-mail address: vladimir.zhechev@ue-varna.bg / Tel.: +00359887613418

1. Introduction

Nowadays, traditional economy takes new forms and develops in different directions. An increasing amount of business takes place in a digital environment, using the benefits that online networks and web technologies offer. Digital innovations alter the structure and rules of the conventional business by allowing new products, services, operations, etc. to be created. They build a new environment in the context of information societies which has the ability to facilitate demand and supply.

However, real-time decision-making and individualisation of offers cannot be possible without collecting customer information (including demographics, preferences, behaviours, etc.). Digital technology can serve as means for collecting and optimising customer information processing. Based on this data, many service companies build their integrated marketing communications (IMCs) and brand positioning strategies.

As noted, based on customer data, companies use IMC to reach target audiences in order to be informed about the existence, benefits, attributes, etc. of the services offered. In terms of high standardisation in the services sector, however, one of the major issues facing marketing professionals in these organisations is how to make their brand distinct from competitors. Positioning is a process that can help to actively combat 'noise' in communication channels and allow brands to occupy a distinct, meaningful and concise place in the customers' mind. Positioning strategies, in turn, can invariably change the pattern in which customers view and perceive a particular brand. By identifying the impact of specific IMC campaigns and the effects of brand positioning, service companies can refine and tailor their promotional activities. This paper is part of a larger study on the perceptions of customers towards domestic services in Australia that serve as a premise for reviewing, updating and refining existing brand positioning strategies and tactics of the company Fantastic Services Australia (FSA).

2. Conceptual Framework of IMC and Brand Positioning

Shimp (2010) defines IMCs as a process of planning, building, integrating and coordinating all touch points with the customers of an organisation that may have a direct or indirect impact on their purchasing decision. Luxton, Reid and Mavondo (2015) expand on that by outlining that IMCs form their conceptual logic and practical application as a mechanism that provides opportunities for optimisation of communication techniques to achieve better communication efficiency, which also supports brand performance.

The service sector requires a special focus on integration between the different communication channels, as quality of service, brand image and location are among the determining factors for customers (Loredana & Micu, 2014). A major challenge for marketing professionals in the service sector is how to send multiple messages to target audiences by ensuring communication channel consistency and maintaining relative unity of the communication mix. Some recent sources of academic literature explore the adoption of artificial intelligence and service automation that can facilitate communication between service companies and their target audiences (Ivanov & Webster, 2017). This process itself requires the coordination of various communication techniques and elements, which in essence puts off mass media as a main communication medium.

Given the emergent competition between market players in the domestic services sector and the timely counter actions of major competitors, organisations in this business have to cope with some IMC challenges by developing brand strategies that can transform communication resources into effective results such as: awareness, recognisability and brand value, among others. An important issue here is the need to ensure that all forms of communication work coherently and are consistent with social and psychoemotional reasons that drive customer behaviour (Gengler & Mulvey, 2017). Compliance with the organisation's marketing strategy must also be respected to ensure mutual

understanding of the communication objectives by all parties involved in the process of building and maintaining a strong brand, image and reputation.

The review of the specialised literature highlights the following major objectives of IMC for service companies: 1) achieving higher sales; 2) improvement of brand image; 3) encouraging the frequency of purchases; 4) expanding the popularity of corporate and individual brands; 5) creating unique positioning offerings in real-world conditions and virtual space; 6) building favourable customer attitudes, among others (Konovalova & Jatualiaviciene, 2015; Verma & Jain, 2015). Essentially, IMCs allow service companies to synchronise their brand communications on a consistent basis, so as they provide adequate messages to their target audiences. These messages can grant meaningful contribution to the design of a brand positioning strategy.

The conceptual model visualised below consists of three blocks. The first block, IMC of FSA, which incorporate individual sub-blocks with questions to assess the company’s key attributes, methods and communication channels. The second block lists the variables against which the company compares against its direct competitors on the Australian domestic services market for the purposes of building a brand positioning strategy. The last block looks at website characteristics, propensity for recommendations and positioning benefits.

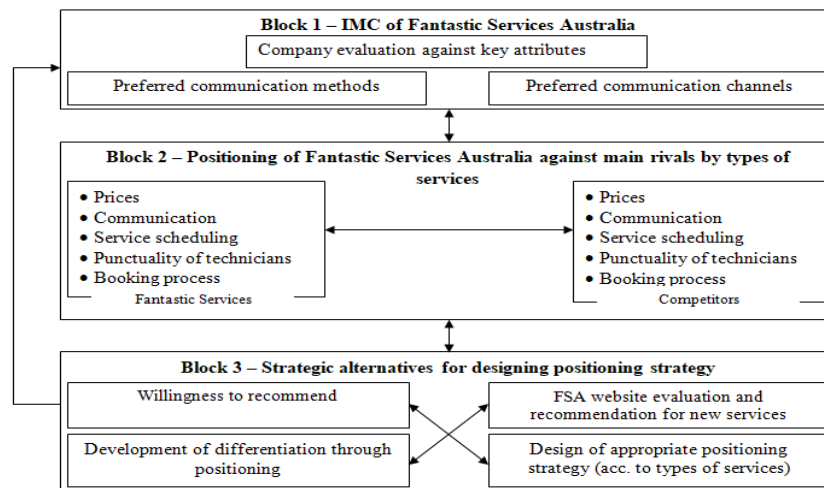


Figure 1. Conceptual model of IMC and competitive positioning measures

The main conception of this study is: 1) to find out what is the current position of FSA; 2) to identify customer needs with regard to the services offered and 3) compare brand positioning performance of major rivals on the Australian domestic services market. In this way, the authors structure the basis for defining recommendations for optimisation of the brand positioning process on the studied market.

Managers’ vision regarding a brand identity (and the relevant points of parity and points of difference) is important for the design of positioning strategies, but they do not allow the assessment of the perception of the brand compared to direct competitors. In view of this, one of the most commonly used tools for plotting the competitive position of a brand against its rivals is the positioning map. Dibb and Simkin (2008) point out that positioning maps are based on a set of mathematical or qualitative approaches used to describe and place client perceptions for a given brand in a spatial plan. The authors remark that these maps are means of visualising the relative position of different brands (one with respect to others).

There is an abundance of academic sources of literature on different algorithms for collecting information needed to construct a positioning map. Among the commonly used methods and

algorithms are: PREFMAP, MDPREF, multidimensional scaling (MDS), cluster analysis and more (Hooley, Piercy & Nicoulaud, 2008). Hadjinicola and Charalambous (2013) present an innovative method of positioning based on the self-organising map (SOM) architecture. The logic of SOM is based on the fact that certain parts of the brain respond to various stimuli and sensory signals. In a certain way, that part of the brain that reacts to a particular stimulus keeps a map of this stimulus. For example, when colour stimuli are applied, specific brain cell areas react and show activity. In this way, adjacent cells develop adaptively in specific detectors of different signalling patterns. Overall, SOM seeks to mimic this localisation of brain functions by setting specific artificial neurons to different input signal models through a self-organised learning process. This method has been applied by specialists in the context of segmentation, targeting and positioning.

Specialised literature also provides information on other tools that can help marketers to identify competitive alternatives in positional decisions and designing brand position strategies. Hahn, Won, Kang and Hyun (2006) call them 'context maps'. These maps reflect visually the increase/decrease in market share when adding an alternative to the customer choice network. This tool can also be helpful in classifying contextual effects (e.g. adding/removing an alternative to a service, post-purchase responses, etc.). The authors also offer some key metrics for contextual effects analysis that can be used in the brand positioning process.

Despite the huge amount of criticisms that the above-mentioned methods and algorithms are often associated with in relation to the insufficient level of validity of the produced results, they are an important part of the process of developing a brand positioning map. What unites them is the collection of primary information related to customer requirements and perceptions of a particular brand and its competitors. No less important is the fact that they summarise and present actual information visually that can be easily communicated and used for the purpose of building a brand positioning strategy.

3. Methodology and Results

The approximate size of the population in the surveyed period (October 2016–May 2017) covers approximately 2,999,179 units. The target respondents were reached through the Marketing Department of FSA. The latter are interested in the results and actively contribute to the dissemination of the survey.

First of all, important attributes and flaws in the key services offered by FSA (end of lease cleaning, carpet cleaning and one-off cleaning) are identified. Subsequently, a focus group interview was held with employees occupying managerial positions at the Australian Company (Services Managers, Service Manager Coordinator, Customer Service Manager and Managing Director of the organisation). At this step, key attributes and shortcomings of the services offered by the company have been filtered and evaluated (through the use of 5-point Likert scale), and then, have been ranked according to their degree of importance. Namely, the category attributes identified are: quality, booking process, trustworthiness, attention to details, customer support, availability, pricing, quality control and online customer reviews. Based on the results, a survey card was developed for the markets in Sydney and Melbourne. It attempts to evaluate the performance of FSA, according to the results of the focus group interview, as well as to compare the company's position against its direct competitors on the Australian domestic services market. The results of the study serve as a basis for positioning mapping (through employing MDS) and offering some strategic alternatives for the development of the Fantastic Services brand and its positioning strategy on the Australian domestic services market.

The authors use the specialised software Marketing Engineering for Excel for the design of 3-D positioning maps for the three types of services in the markets in Melbourne and Sydney. All maps are produced by the use of MDS to visualise the level of perceived similarity between individual competitors in the Australian domestic services market. In particular, each rival is placed in N-dimensional space and receives coordinates according to the customer's results on the key attributes

identified above. The resulting brand positioning maps allow the researchers: 1) to identify spaces for positioning of new services; 2) to reveal the client perspective of the similarities/differences between direct competitors in the market concerned; 3) to identify the most direct and distant competitors; 4) looking for ways to differentiate from competitors and/or ways to approach them and 5) measure the distance to the 'ideal' (for the particular situation and market) perception point of consumers.

The results of the study allow the researchers to arrive at the following more significant conclusions and recommendations that can be addressed to FSA:

1. The company is considered to be offering quality domestic services. FSA strives to take advantage of new market opportunities by achieving a competitive advantage through: relatively more flexible franchise conditions for partners and differentiation based on real-time quoting, service quality guarantees, timeliness of execution, etc.
2. The booking process has been evaluated as simple and accessible. FSA carries out most of the booking process activities online. Some patterns of online behaviour (time spent on a particular page, clicks, text/texture/banner hover, etc.) can be identified during the booking, which can be further used in the quoting process and brand positioning.
3. Challenges are found in assessing the company's perceived trustworthiness, service schedule and customer support quality. In order to improve the processes related to service schedule management and customer service quality, the company needs to set meaningful and reasoned metrics for evaluation.
4. Quality control and pricing stand out as a hallmark of the services explored. They can be promoted through means of the franchising network.
5. The company is not active enough in offline communications. FSA can take advantage of some opportunities that the offline media is able to offer: provision of promotional materials in physical business locations of real estate companies, travel agencies, visa brokerage agencies and others; promoting social media presence by targeting specific pages through posters; organising events to demonstrate different services, speed and quality of performance, etc.
6. FSA serves its customers through a variety of communication channels, but with fluctuating efficiency. The company must conduct continuous monitoring of the efficiency of managing the various communication channels. Running these channels in a consistent manner (especially in emergencies) must be well planned and adapted.
7. The mobile application is used by a small number of users and email is the preferred booking channel. Low user activity through the app may be found in the wrong targeting of users who would value it as useful. For this purpose, FSA should focus on clarity, context, choice and coherence between email communications and GoFantastic mobile app.
8. The ownership of the property is directly related to the services used. It has been shown that in Australia (despite the significant number of tenants), homeowners are buying several homes throughout their lives, thus, contributing to economic growth and job creation. Each sale of real estate is accumulating costs associated with lawn care, renovation, redevelopment, furniture transportation, furnishing and more. These are services that fall into the portfolio of FSA and the company can take care of.
9. The quality of service and reliability of the company are among the most significant attributes for owners and residents of own properties. To maintain a high level of quality, it is recommended that the company focuses on:
 - the professional attire of the technicians
 - the cleanliness of vehicles
 - the rich set of equipment
 - quality control
 - portfolio of past services to end clients and businesses.

These suggested measures can also contribute to the perceived reliability of the company. The latter reflects the possibility of constantly providing a selected service. Highly important is the ability

of the company to perform all the services it offers in view of the fact that the owners of their own property are more demanding than the tenants. On the other hand, the factor that can influence the perceived reliability is the possibility of a timely response. Thus, the time for responding to complaints should be minimised. Last but not least, FSA, despite its excellent performance on the attributes examined, must monitor and explore the dynamics of all the variables that are considered important by consumers and characterise the companies in the industry. This would allow a more accurate adaptation of a brand identity and management of the brand positioning process. The development of a positioning strategy should also take into account the new social media, mobility, data analytics and cloud computing trends that reveal new perspectives for evaluating and analysing perceptual performance.

4. Strategic Brand Positioning Alternatives

Digital marketing communications are targeted at profiled target groups that are active in the communication process. Any communication stream may require a response from the addressees. This provides an opportunity for immediate feedback and feed forward, which in turn allows the success of digital communications to be relatively easy and cheap to measure (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). On the other hand, digital communications are carried out at lower prices but require specialised and in-depth knowledge to avoid the dissemination of unsolicited information to inaccurate target audiences.

In contemporary business terms, there is a tendency for more and more products and services to be ordered online. This makes the process of searching, selecting and evaluating alternatives relatively easy. This study found that in Australia:

- Website design and navigation of domestic service providers is underestimated.
- Client testimonials can help customer choice and build confidence.
- Scarcity of photo/video material about the services provided.
- Information on satisfaction guarantees is available, but it is not clear how they are being processed.
- Opportunity to receive multiple quotes for a particular service at once intensifies the competitive environment.
- Online booking/booking platforms are the preferred environment for receiving offers.
- A small number of organisations surveyed offer online payments.
- Blogs and cleaning tips are proven tools to attract customers, but their content remains scarce.

On the basis of this information, domestic services providers can explore in more detail the parameters on the basis of which customers are looking for such services in a digital environment. The choice of domestic services is also influenced by many factors outlined above, which need to be explored in greater detail on service/regional market level. By virtue of this companies' efforts can be concentrated on the right tools and techniques to achieve the desired position. Last but not least, the web-based content and opportunities offered by mobile marketing must be exploited to obtain timely and relevant information from customers who are quick to respond to communication incentives and are eager to receive a quote. In this way, Australian domestic services companies can get important information for the brand positioning process, which is particularly important in view of the fact that mobile marketing growth is ahead of that of social networks. It is also important to implement adequate measures to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the brand presence.

Brand positioning can be considered effective when aligned with the needs and interests of current and potential customers. In this regard, this research reveals important prospects for FSA's customers related to the competitive perception of the main market players and important attributes of the brand. Marketing professionals in the company need research tools to identify the criteria that consumers apply when choosing a service provider. In addition, the FSA should use its built-in

technological competencies and experience to optimise specific communication channels that were not expediently used until the time of the survey.

The methods applied in this study allow the authors to identify key attributes, advantages and disadvantages of FSA against other major market players. Continuous monitoring of these variables is crucial, because consumers tend to react differently to individual incentives and demonstrate different behaviours over time and respond to multi-faceted psycho-emotional causes in purchasing decision making.

This study is based on segmentation and positioning theories by looking at the FSA brand through a customer perspective. The positioning maps reveal important perceptual features of the brand and allow to point out guidelines for focusing on the positioning process in the company and its three key services. Separate channels are proposed to deliver marketing information to customers as well as appropriate tools and innovations that can help the company to differentiate and strengthen its competitive edge.

4.1. End of lease—Melbourne

On the basis of the results obtained by individual attributes, FSA provides the most reasonable prices, the easiest communication, the most flexible service schedule, the technicians are the most accurate and the booking process is spotless. Based on these results, it is proposed that the company selects a positioning strategy based on the features of this service. In order to implement this brand positioning strategy, it is advisable for the company to increase its presence in social networks (Facebook and Instagram), taking into account conversion levels with an emphasis on eco-friendly products that are considered an important trend that may affect the domestic services market in Australia.

4.2. End of lease—Sydney

At the top of all perceptive indicators within this service on the Sydney market is the AAA Cleaning services company. This rival achieves an almost maximum score on all attributes and is practically located in close proximity to the ideal point of perception. FSA faces very intense competition from other market players as well. Under these circumstances, the company can rely on innovative repositioning that involves exploring and testing a new strategic position that has market potential that is not currently being exploited by the direct competitors. To differentiate, FSA can modify the franchise model itself by offering its partners a specific territory to serve (*n*-number of households, private properties and business buildings, according to the franchisee's scale and expertise). This territory should only be served by this particular company through a local website.

4.3. Carpet cleaning—Melbourne

In Melbourne's carpet cleaning service market, FSA is once again the leader in all the studied attribute categories. It should also be taken into account that the company's average ratings are relatively remote from the ideal point of perception. To reinforce its competitive advantage, it is recommended that FSA implements a positioning strategy based on brand attributes. This strategy uses specific organisational achievements to attain differentiation. For example, the company can use key words such as: one-stop shop for household needs to distinguish its portfolio of over 25 services that can be offered at the most convenient time and at the most reasonable price. On the other hand, FSA can also highlight its excellent rating (4.3 from 05.10.2017 to 07.10.2017) from www.productreview.com.au, the 360° happiness principle, serving more than 40,000 customers a month and others that distinguish this market player significantly from its direct rivals.

4.4. Carpet cleaning—Sydney

FSA demonstrates high performance and dominates its competitors for this service in Sydney. However, it is good to consider the distance from the ideal point of perception and the close values of the attribute 'booking process'. In order to maintain the favourable position of the company, it is recommended that FSA uses a brand positioning strategy based on the price-quality ratio. The FSA is the sole leader in terms of prices, with the closest competitor reporting comparative lower performance of 2.5 points. In addition to its price advantage, the company can also emphasise on the high quality of service delivery through the presence of a company representative during its execution.

4.5. One-off—Melbourne

In the framework of one-off cleaning services in Melbourne, Absolute Domestic is recognised as the leader, with the highest scores on all tested attributes. On the other hand, FSA faces aggressive competition by the following companies: Jenny Queen Cleaning, Bizzibeez and VIP Home Services. In view of the intense competition on this market and the apparently high-up leader, it is proposed that FSA implements a positioning strategy based on specific brand attributes as the company is barely distinguishable from its direct competitors in terms of prices, communication and booking process. Hereby, FSA reports a noticeable strength (punctuality of technicians) that can be a pivot for differentiation and creating a POD. This can be achieved by investing in: 1) online paid directories that major search engines report and have high rating in SERP; 2) Affiliate networks that work with many companies and their clients offer FSA services against commissions (in the event that a customer contacts the FSA, this intermediary gets an introductory commission, etc.) and 3) offline communications through franchisees arriving on time and providing promotional material stating that the company is seeking to be as accurate as possible.

4.6. One-off—Sydney

Cleaners Sydney is emerging as the leader in Sydney's one-off cleaning service market. The company is close to the point of ideal perception, and FSA is lagging behind its direct competitors. For example, FSA has the lowest score in terms of the prices offered and occupies the fourth position (as a cumulative result) in the minds of the participants in this study. An appropriate brand positioning strategy that FSA can apply is based on the relationship between the service and the customer. In this case, FSA can use online applications (such as add-ons and/or extensions) for different web browsers that provide easy access for customers to booking options. These applications are a proven way to integrate user-centred software solutions that shorten the time spent on searching, receiving and handling information, shopping and more. Another possibility that can be utilised is online blogging. Due to the high rating of some popular blogs, many companies invest in publishing paid information related to their services, which has a high level of penetration. Along with the most popular blogs about Australian domestic services are: Decorum, The Design Files, Get in My Home, House by the Water and Interiors Addict. They can be used as mediators of marketing information, including: how one can clean with ease, 'do yourself a section', how to care for furnishings, etc.

Another modern brand positioning alternative that can be used by FSA for all the services it deals with is *proximity marketing* that enables it to distribute information for promotional purposes in specific consumer areas. Information can be disseminated through wireless technologies such as NFC, Bluetooth, Cloud-based applications, GPS, Wi-Fi, etc., as long as the addressees agree that their devices will be disseminating ad messages. According to some sources, over 44 billion sales were generated in 2016 using proximity marketing technologies that connect the digital and physical world (www.beaconstac.com). Many companies now offer software, hardware and cloud technologies to provide marketing content and analytical tools. The very idea of this type of marketing allows the

combination of customer interests, purchase intents and the physical space where the transaction can take place.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

Creating content by companies is able to multiply the effects of other communication channels. Such potential synergy can also be explored at consumer level, based on their experience with social media, its orientation towards new technologies and sensitivity to certain types of service ads. Australian domestic services companies can get important management ideas about using social media for better ROI despite their proven significance for modern business.

On the other hand, the broad scope of social media is driving more and more companies around the world to use them as the primary channel for providing marketing communications. Firm-generated content and the synergy effects it can bring along with TV ads and email marketing become subject to broad-spectrum research. In this regard, Australian domestic services companies can adapt existing methodologies/develop their own to study the effects of socially crafted social media content on performance indicators such as: customer profitability, cost, achieved cross sales, realised up sales, etc. Conducting such study will require data on customer attendance in social media, data on social media transactions, customers' attitudes to online shopping, and online behaviour before and during the purchase. Such information can be provided by making use of online analytical tools.

An interesting trend outlined in the Australian domestic services market is the consumer's propensity to use mobile applications, which emerges as a cornerstone of mobile marketing development. In this regard, the intersection between mobile marketing and shopper marketing is known in the specialised literature as mobile shopper marketing. It is formally defined as the process of planning and implementing all mobile marketing activities that impact the buyer in the pre-post and post-purchase period, from initial incentives and impacts to purchasing, consumption, re-purchase and recommendations. There is a gap in the academic literature in this field. To this end, future research in the field can focus on the mobile shopping process and its corresponding purchasing decision models. Emphasis can be put on the key link units in the process: clients, employees, organisation and mobile technologies. This way, one can identify challenges and apply incentives to motivate customers to make real-time reservations by optimising the static features of most accessible applications.

In addition to the results that the study reveals about the competitive positioning of the Australian domestic services market, such a study looking at other brands (in other industries such as travel, telecommunications and digital marketing) can increase the usefulness of the outcomes and the practical application of the lessons learned through exploring the brand's positioning process and the resulting effects in other countries as well.

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