

Dick Maggione: Trout's positioning legacy is brand success strategy

By Dick Maggione Special to The Canton Repository

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Jack Trout's counsel to 500 Ohio business leaders in 2009 rings as true today as it did the day he delivered it. Times like these, he said, are opportunities for companies and brands.

His passing last week might have silenced his voice, but it will not mute the impact Trout and his thinking had on marketing and advertising. Widely regarded as the world's top marketing strategist and acknowledged as the father of positioning, he had much to share with brand builders around the world and right here in Stark County.

His last visit to the area came in 2009, when he addressed 500 business leaders from throughout Northeast Ohio at the John S. Knight Center in Akron. He provided guidance that — like positioning itself — transcends the years.

“Times like these are opportunities for companies to reposition themselves, to make tough changes, to attack their competitors' inherent weaknesses and promote their position while the competition is being quiet,” he told the gathered throng.

He was referring to the recessionary period and offering hope at a time when many companies were in despair, and the guidance he delivered that day is just as fitting today.

The ideas he laid out for his local audience, like those he explained in the 16 books he wrote or co-authored, are for-the-ages business principles. They are rooted in the principle of positioning, the single-most powerful concept in marketing. Trout put positioning in the spotlight in 1981 with the publication of “Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind,” which he co-wrote with partner Al Ries.

The ideas they put forth 36 years ago have been guiding brand stewards ever since. Positioning is about finding, then focusing on, the meaningful idea that differentiates us from our competitors.

Many in the audience that day in April 2009 were Stark County business leaders who took Trout's messages back to their companies. They can count themselves among the fortunate

professionals to hear advice from the man whose work influenced tens of thousands of marketers, boosted hundreds of brands and impacted billions of consumers — including all of us here in the Canton area.

Jack Trout inspires us daily at Innis Maggiore. Positioning works for us and for our clients. Advertising Age, our industry's leading trade journal, wrote that "Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind" is one of the most influential marketing books written. I strongly recommend it to all who seek understanding about how they can gain a leg up on growing their brands and businesses.

Another influential Trout book is "In Search of the Obvious — The Antidote to Today's Marketing Mess." Pardon me if I get personal for a moment, but one of the most emotional days of my life was the day Jack told me he was dedicating his book "In Search of the Obvious" to me.

That was Trout. He gave credit to those who helped him broaden his thinking and develop new ideas to stay pertinent for those who engaged in what he often referred to as "marketing warfare."

As he wrapped up his address here that day in 2009, he left his audience with five guiding thoughts from "In Search of the Obvious." I'm pleased to share them again today:

1. "The problem, when solved, will be simple. The obvious is nearly always simple — so simple that sometimes a whole generation of men and women have looked at it without even seeing it."
2. "Does it check with human nature? Remember, you're dealing with people's minds."
3. "Put it on paper. Write out your idea in words of one or two syllables, as though you were explaining it to a child."
4. "Does it explode in people's minds? Will they say, 'Why didn't I think of that before?'"
5. "Is the time right? An idea too far ahead or too far behind is no good."

Jack Trout taught us positioning is a competitive strategy. Ultimately, it is the reason customers will buy our brand.

"Breakfast with Jack Trout" was the last visit he made to the Canton area and 500 of our friends were blessed to have had the opportunity to learn from him directly. We thank Jack for his enormous contribution. We are better today because he so ardently and clearly articulated positioning as the obvious answer to our marketing challenges.

Dick Maggiore is president and CEO of Innis Maggiore, founded in Canton in 1974 and today the nation's leading positioning ad agency, building strong brands for companies in competitive markets here and across the country.