

## POSITIONING

by Carrie McLaren  
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To a Martian visiting the United States, Ensure and Nutrament would seem like virtually identical products. It's easy to see why: both are "liquid meals" that consist of sugar, oil, and combination of vitamins. Both come in various flavors—Chocolate, Vanilla, Strawberry—and provide dinner-in-a-can for people who aren't getting a balanced diet. But though the products themselves are similar, Nutrament and Ensure have very different positions (or "brand identities") in the market. Whereas Nutrament is targeted to low-income, inner-city consumers, Ensure is targeted to the elderly and people with digestion problems.

Brand identities like those of Ensure and Nutrament are engineered through a process sometimes called **positioning**. This process is especially important for products that are otherwise indistinguishable from other products in their category. Disposable razors, for example, are practically all the same, materially. The same can be said of shampoos and soaps; except for minor differences in fragrance and lather, they are identical. Products that are similar like this are known as **parity products** (parity means "of equal value").

Since parity goods within any category are pretty much all the same, competitors rely on positioning to distinguish brands from one another. Products thus compete based on image rather than on the intrinsic qualities of the product itself.

Since the positioning often has very little to do with the product, it can be changed without necessarily changing the product. So when a positioning fails or becomes passe, a product may be **repositioned**—given a new identity.

Often, products are repositioned to target a different audience. A few examples:

Because it was the first cigarette to have a filter tip (making it milder than most), Marlboro cigarettes were originally targeted to "decent, respectable" women. A 1927 ad read, "Women quickly develop discerning taste. That is why Marlboros now ride in so many limousines, attend so many bridge parties, and repose in so many handbags." But in the 1950s, Marlboro was repositioned as a brand for manly men. A new generation of Marlboro ads featured tattooed tough guys, and sales of Marlboro skyrocketed, becoming the top-selling brand.

The movie *Showgirls* was a bomb at the box office, failing to attract the hip young audience the producers wanted. So when it came time to sell the

video release, marketers repositioned *Showgirls* as a "camp" or "cult" sleeper. Similarly, when the CBS television series *Central Park West* failed as a "Dynasty for generation X," the show was repositioned as a soap for older audiences.

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Marlboro cigarettes originally targeted women. This ad ran in *Cosmopolitan* in 1952. In the late 1950s, Marlboro was repositioned as a "tough guy" brand.

*The histories of Nutrament and Ensure provide further examples of how positioning works.*

## **Nutrament**

Launched in 1961 as a power drink for athletes, Nutrament was originally touted as a way for skinny teens to bulk up. At one time, it was common practice for football trainers to hand out Nutrament to players before games. But by the mid-1980s, however, sports nutritionists derided the drink as a mere sugar rush and sales fell flat.

Around that time, executives at Bristol-Myers,

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## **Once positioned as a power drink for athletes, Nutrament was repositioned in the 1980s as a meal substitute for poor, urban minorities.**

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makers of Nutrament, noticed that sales of the product were usually strong among Hispanics and West Indians and sensed even more potential with minority groups. Nutrament was then repositioned as a meal in a can for inner-city minorities. Since 1993, the company has spent millions of dollars repackaging and marketing the drink on inner-city billboards, magazines, and radio programs that cater to minorities.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* (11/2/94) quotes a couple of satisfied customers:

“When you’re on drugs, solid food isn’t easy to get down,” says a 39-year-old welfare recipient . . . “It’s easier to drink something, and I definitely make sure it’s something that’s good for me.”

“I mix it with Baileys Irish Cream and ooh la la,” Jay Bailey says. Mr. Bailey is downing his fifth Nutrament of the day on a noisy New York subway platform. Singing for spare change earns the homeless Mr. Bailey about \$15 a day; most of it he spends on Nutrament. “I sing for Nutrament,” he says, plucking his bass and laughing ruefully.

In the article, a Bristol-Myers rep says the company doesn’t specifically target drug-addicted or

homeless people, though spokesperson Jerry McCabe added, “It certainly wouldn’t surprise me if drug addicts buy the product.”

The percentage of sales from drug addicts is difficult to estimate, but according to the *Wall Street Journal*, Nutrament is “the bomb” with cocaine users. *The Source* magazine once named Nutrament one of “36 Things That Blew Up or Succeeded Because of Crack.”

While Nutrament includes 19 vitamins and minerals, its chief ingredients are skim milk, soybean oil, and sugar—43 grams of sugar per 12-ounce can or the same amount contained in ten Oreo cookies.

## **Ensure**

Ensure was not originally meant for the mass market. Created for people with temporary digestion problems, it was positioned as a meal replacement for use in hospitals and nursing homes.

In the late 1980s, when seniors became a hot marketing segment, Ross Products repositioned Ensure as a mass-market baby formula for the elderly. New flavors (eggnog, butter pecan, coffee, black walnut) and versions (Ensure Plus, with extra protein and calories, and Ensure Light) were a part of the plan. So was Homebound Remembered, a “grassroots” promo campaign targeting elderly shut-ins. Through that program, local agencies distributed tote bags filled with cheerful letters from schoolchildren, Ross nutritional surveys and brochures, and coupons for Ensure.

Ensure has become a blockbuster seller, ranking up estimated sales of \$500 million and spawning copycats like Boost, ReSource, and Nutr-Need. So thorough is the Ensure promo-machine that when Salt Lake City’s meals-on-wheels office tried to halt deliveries of the product to its clients, they had to relent. The protest was too great.

After its trail-blazing success with Ensure, Ross developed other nutritional drinks, including Advera, designed for people who are HIV positive, and Pediasure, for children. (*Wall Street Journal*, 4/25/96)