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The Agency Proposition Canvas™

Strengthen your strategy, step by step

The Canvas

Agency Proposition Canvas™

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01 Target client <i>Who should we work with?</i>	02 Service category <i>What do these clients need from us?</i>
Positioning	

03 Client problem <i>What's their biggest burning issue?</i>	04 Unique solution <i>What's the unique way we solve this problem?</i>
Difference	

05 Client benefit <i>How does our unique solution benefit clients?</i>	06 Proof points <i>How can we evidence our unique solution?</i>
Value	

07 Direct competitors <i>Who else would clients consider?</i>	08 Competitor Weakness <i>Why is their solution not as effective as ours?</i>
Validation	

Proposition					
We are the only	02 Service Category	agency that helps	01 Target Clients		
who	03 Client Problem	by	04 Unique Solution	so they can	05 Client Benefit

The Proposition

Using the Agency Proposition Canvas™

This canvas is a strategic document to help you define a standout proposition. Read through the theory then work through each of the sections from 1-8, discussing the possibilities, opportunities and downsides. Run workshops, complete exercises, and push to reach a consensus. Make sure your main decision-maker(s) are involved in completing this canvas, as it will need someone to make a call on any deadlocks. The aim is to define one clear answer for each section so that there's no ambiguity, grey areas, or messy multiple answers.

Try to keep a consistent line of thought through each step, always referring back to the first and most important one; your target client. Make them central to every decision and put yourself in their shoes at every stage. Your whole agency exists to serve these people, so put them on a pedestal for this process and champion what they want, need and expect from you. Work through each step from 1-8 to define one well-defined answer for each. And good luck.

Your agency needs a standout proposition

Your agency's proposition is the unique value you bring to your clients. It's more than just a snazzy tagline, it's the strategic reason to choose you over your competitors. A strong, standout proposition gives you the power to control your sales, marketing and growth. You waste less time pitching and writing proposals because your proposition sells for you. You no longer have to hustle to generate leads or haggle to close them because your proposition gives you authority. And you cut away the competition both below and above because you're competing on your terms, rather than theirs.

Which means making big strategic decisions

These are business decisions that need to be taken seriously, using rigour and research. Although the Agency Proposition Canvas looks simple, it's incredibly difficult to do well. You'll need to challenge yourself and make choices based on your target client's perspective rather than your own internal bias. You'll need to explore multiple possibilities and be open to totally new directions. And you'll need to say no to most possibilities for the proposition to really work, which feels limiting and unnatural for many agency leaders.

The proposition formula

The aim of this strategic process is to complete this seemingly simple proposition statement. By working through each section of the canvas, you should be able to find one answer for each white box below. Avoid hedging your bets with multiple answers, this is a cop out and will leave you with a vague and weak proposition.

One of the key words in this proposition is 'only'. This whole process and proposition statement is about finding your agency's uniqueness. Don't worry if it ends up as a clunky sentence to start with. The aim isn't to sound nice right now, it's to say something strategically sound that helps you stand out and win the right clients. The polish can come later.



Push your agency to new places

By working through this canvas, you're looking to reach a proposition that explains why you're the obvious choice to win this specific kind of client. Once you reach this, you're ready. Ready to get out there and win the kind of work you've always wanted. To avoid all the pointless hustling and haggling. To control your own growth, getting off the roller coaster and into the race car.

Suddenly your proposition does the selling before you even step foot in the room. Clients come to you because you're the clear favourite. In fact, the only agency they're speaking to. That's the power of a proper proposition, not a sloppy proposition. And now it's all in your hands.

Time to get going...

01 Target Client

What

This is the specific business or person your agency is looking to work with. The more tightly defined this target client is, the stronger and more effective your proposition will be.

Why

When you have one clear target client in mind, you can position your agency as the only viable option to solve their specific problem. Your messaging will resonate better because they'll feel like your whole proposition is designed specifically to help them.

How

- Finding your ideal target client is about who you want to work with going forward, not just who you've worked with historically. This is your chance to redefine who you should serve. This may be a type of client you already work with, but it may be a strategic move to a new target client.
- Start by analysing your current or previous clients and scoring each against the three Fs; Fun (how enjoyable they are to work with), Fame (how much they enhance your reputation) and fortune (their commercial viability). This should start to show you any immediate trends or patterns to explore.
- Next, map out a list of dream clients you'd love to work with. Forget whether they're feasible right now and just note them down. Again, see if you can spot any similarities between these target clients. Are they all in the same industry? Do they all have a certain product or mission?
- Once you've started to build a more focused picture of your target client, you'll need to map out their business firmographics such as headcount, location, product or service, turnover, and pricing etc. This should give you a pragmatic overview of the kind of client business you're looking to land.
- Now you'll need to consider the person at this business that's your target client. Map out their demographics such as age, job role, income, behaviours, online presence etc. This will help you build a more personal overview of who you're targeting.

Considerations

The more focused you are on one specific target client, the more likely you are to win them. However you'll be at the mercy of this market and could leave yourself vulnerable to external forces beyond your control. Having a handful of target clients helps mitigate this risk but leaves you with a more generic proposition that will struggle to resonate as well across all clients. This comes down to your personal balance between risk and reward. But remember, most target clients represent a big enough market if you're able to win them internationally too.

02 Service Category

What

This is the overarching name commonly given to your main set of services, eg. Digital Marketing, Website Design or LinkedIn Advertising etc.

Why

By streamlining your services and operating in a specific category, you can shrink your competitor set and build authority in this space. Broad service categories such as Marketing cast the widest net for attracting ideal clients but also have high competition. Narrowing your service category to something specific like Instagram Ads shrinks your competitor set but also your potential market.

How

- Start by analysing your current services. Score each current service on how enjoyable, profitable and scalable it is. Then rank these in order to see which services score best and which may be expendable.
- Map your services onto a pyramid with the main service at the top, decreasing in priority as you go down. You'll then need to decide if you'll continue to offer all of these lower services, or whether some are no longer needed and are just an occasional offer or a distraction from your core discipline.
- Do some online research to see which agencies come up when searching for a specific service category. There are also online tools available to gather data on search volume for specific keywords, which can help when deciding your service category.

Considerations

You need to consider what your ideal client is searching for when they're in the market for an agency with your set of services. Like it or not, clients put agencies into subcategories and this dictates who they see as alternatives to you. The aim is to be narrow enough so that you're seen as an expert, yet wide enough that there's a viable market for these services.

03 Client Problem

What

This is the most urgent and valuable issue your target clients need to solve. It might be a business problem, a personal problem, or even an industry problem.

Why

Today it's unlikely you can find a positioning (target client + service category) that has no competition but a big enough market. So solving a specific client problem is a smart way to establish a point of differentiation over competitors inside your positioning space. This problem can evolve over time and will resonate with target clients on a deeper level than just presenting your services. It should sit at the heart of your agency's messaging and marketing strategy and it should attract clients who feel they need this specific problem solved.

How

- Start by speaking to past, current or prospective clients. Ask them about the issues they're facing. Similarly, try recording sales calls to spot common trends as well as specific language used when talking about these problems.
- Complete a target client empathy map using your experience and intuition to identify different problems they may face.
- Consider all types of target client problems, such as commercial, operational, technical, personal and experiential. Seeing problems through different lenses will help you hone in on something more specific and differentiated.
- Score your problems to decide which is the one to solve as your core point of difference. Score each against for immediacy (how urgent this problem is), importance (how much of a priority it is) and impact (how much value is unlocked once it's solved).

Considerations

The problem is that most agencies either solve universal problems for clients that don't help them differentiate, or they try to solve multiple problems at the same time which becomes confusing. The aim here is to find one big burning issue that resonates with the right clients. Many agencies shy away from any form of negativity in their messaging and marketing, but done properly this is a powerful way to tap into your target client's subconscious. The key is to normalise the problem so the prospect doesn't feel defensive, but rather realises this must be a common issue.

04 Unique Solution

What

This is your unique way of solving your target client's problem. It might be a unique service, delivery model, process, fee structure, tech product, guiding principle, category perspective, cultural insight or something else.

Why

This is your differentiator as only your agency solves this problem this way. It's your chance to create competitive distance and build a robust point of difference that you can easily defend. Done well, it will sit at the heart of everything you do and act as a north star.

How

- Map out all potential solutions to your chosen target client problem, looking through the various lenses listed in the What section above. Consider resources you have right now as well as what could be created in order to solve this specific problem. Score each to decide which is the strongest solution to lead with.
- Once you've defined your solution, research your competitors to sense-check they're not talking about solving the same problem for the same clients. This will involve a fair amount of online research, reading articles, and scouring social media.
- Develop your unique solution as a prototype to start with and test it as you go. Offer early versions of it to clients to gather feedback. Maybe experiment with marketing it to get reactions and input. See it as an ongoing process rather than a one-and-done deal.
- Consider naming your solution so it's short and memorable. Even if your solution is a guiding principle or a category perspective, the right naming will help it gain traction in the market and stick in people's minds.
- Make sure your unique solution is more than just an empty claim. Build it out in detail, add evidence where possible, and even look to create your own intellectual property protected by trademarking and copyright.

Considerations

Defining your unique solution can be a tricky process as it's dependent on how well you've identified the right client problem. The aim here is to define or refine something that's distinctive (unlike anyone else in your space), desirable (solving a high-value problem for clients) and defensible (backed with credible proof you can deliver). Whereas most agencies jump to selling the same services or solutions as everyone else, by building a bespoke solution to a specific problem you define a stronger point of view and point of difference.

05 Client Benefits

What

This is the positive impact your unique solution will have for clients. This might be commercial, functional, personal, emotional or experiential.

Why

You need to sell your unique solution, so it's vital to understand what makes it beneficial and valuable for your target client. Without this you're left selling the functional features of your solution, rather than how it will make their lives better somehow. This client benefit can then form the basis of your new messaging, giving you a compelling hook that can be used across your comms, new business and marketing.

How

- List all benefits through the various lenses listed above. Go beyond the business benefits and consider how your unique solution impacts the person you're targeting, both emotionally and in terms of their experience of working with you.
- Create a benefit pyramid with revenue/growth/sales at the top and the most functional and table-stakes benefits at the bottom. Then map all your potential benefits into this pyramid to decide which level you feel will resonate best.
- Use your sales and marketing as a platform to test prototype benefit messaging. Landing pages or paid ad campaigns will give you some useful data and insights into the benefits that attract the right clients.
- As you take your new unique solution to market, you'll speak to prospects and clients about how it's helping them. Gather this information and language to use in your proposition as it's best to frame the benefits in the client's own words.

Considerations

In B2B, there are universal benefits that most agencies will be tempted to use. Business growth, increased sales, and higher revenues are benefits every business wants, but because of this they can feel generic. Sometimes the most obvious benefit is a given, so it's worth exploring different angles or nuances around your unique solution. For example, if your solution is an SEO process, the benefit will inevitably be higher search rankings. But selling a more specific, emotive or unusual benefit may get better traction in the market.

06 Proof Points

What

This is the evidence that you can deliver your unique solution, and that it creates the client benefits you claim.

Why

The agency landscape is littered with empty claims and lazy cliches that lack any substantiation. For your unique solution to be taken seriously, you'll need proof and credibility. This can take a variety of forms, but without it you'll be sowing the seeds of doubt with prospects and this can be enough to lose a deal. Understandably, some solutions lend themselves better to proof and evidence than others. But even guiding principles and category perspectives can have credible weight behind them.

How

- Case studies are the obvious starting point, so revisit past projects and see how you can see them through the lens of your unique solution. Maybe speak to past clients and ask them to recount their experience as seen through this new lens.
- Testimonials are a great way to prove credibility. Gather them at each stage of your delivery process so that you can capture the nuance of how your unique solution is helping them.
- Statistics work well for some unique solutions, so if you have access to impressive data or numbers, put them front and centre.
- Look for research that validates your solution or claim. If it exists already make sure there's an easy link to it, or consider doing your own research to substantiate your unique solution.
- Reference influential people who hold the same beliefs in your solution as you. Although this isn't strictly evidence or proof, the aim is to build credibility through association and alignment.

Considerations

If you're struggling to find suitable proof points, this is a sign that your unique solution needs more time in development or that it's too big of a stretch right now. Of course, all strategy work should push you just beyond your comfort zone otherwise it's pointless, but there's a line where ideas are not realistic. This process of generating proof is a great stress-test for your unique solution. And if you can generate decent evidence, this will help you sell your solution moving forward.

07 Direct Competitors

What

These are agencies that offer the same services or solution to the same target client as you. These are your most immediate competitors and should be who you aim to distance from.

Why

By defining who you compete with directly, you can control how your proposition pushes away from these people. Understanding your immediate competitor set gives you a deeper understanding of other agencies' propositions and where there might be a viable opportunity to explore and exploit.

How

- Speak to clients and prospects and ask them outright who else they may be considering. Over time you'll start to hear the same competitor names crop up, meaning they must be in the mix with you.
- Talk to your business network and get a sense of who they consider to be your competitors.
- Hire a market research firm if you have the resources. This will be a more robust process that should yield reliable results, but of course it will come at a financial cost.
- Google results and ads are a great source of market information. Searching for the relevant service category, problem, or solution will start to show you the competitors who either rank for those keywords or who bid on the through ad spend. There are competitor monitoring tools out there that can help you quickly find direct competitors. SEO software like Ahrefs or SEMrush conducts keyword analysis and lists competitive websites.
- Take a look through agency listing sites such as Clutch, or through press and publications such as The Drum, AdWeek, MarketingWeek etc. Many of these will feature and list agencies that may be competitors, plus some run annual awards which is a great way to discover names in your space.
- There are a number of professional trade bodies and associations specifically for agencies, and often separated by discipline. Some online research should show you the organisations working in your space, and many will display member names and logos that you might feel are competitors.

Considerations

Many agencies are reluctant to see themselves as part of a competitor set, preferring to believe they're either unique or that they don't compete at all. But competition isn't dictated by what your agency believes, instead it's driven by your target client and who they consider to be a viable alternative. The aim here is to put yourself in their shoes and go about searching for possible agencies to solve your specific problem. This should start to uncover who is in your orbit.

08 Competitor Weakness

What

These are the robust reasons your competitors can't solve your target clients problem as effectively as you.

Why

Knowing your competitors isn't enough, you need to identify a market gap or opportunity your unique solution can exploit. By understanding the reasons they can't solve your client problem as well as you, you can find your competitive advantage. This competitive intelligence is vital as you take your proposition to market and start to use it to sell. Feeling confident you have a clear and unique reason to be chosen over these competitors will help you drive higher conversions.

How

- Analyse your direct competitors using a SWOT analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Look for where they cross over into your proposition and make a note of the weaknesses you can exploit in your messaging, marketing and sales drive.
- Score your direct competitors against the eight Ps to gain a deeper understanding of their overall propositions. You'll need to research and score the classic four Ps; Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. Then it can be useful to explore the newer ones of People (target audience), Positioning (service and client), Processes (how the work is delivered), and Performance (the results achieved).
- It's also worth researching and analysing an extra P; Problem solved. If any of these agencies are touching on territory you're looking to own, you'll need to decide whether you go head-to-head or adjust your proposition to compete on slightly different terms.
- Complete a simple sentence for each competitor simply stating why their solution is not as effective as yours. Having these all listed on one document (sometimes called a battlecard) means you have a handy reference when creating new assets.

Considerations

Many agencies go through a strategic process like this, get aligned and excited internally, then launch in the market without truly understanding the competitive landscape. In time, these blind spots can trip agencies up as they realise they're competing on the same problem and solution, or that others have moved into the space they thought they owned. Competitors are constantly evolving, so monitoring and moving with them is vital too.

Your new proposition

Finalising your new proposition

Right, you've run the workshops. You've argued endlessly. You've made the big decisions. The canvas is complete with one clear answer per section. Now you need to plug these into the proposition formula.

At first, this statement will probably read really badly. That's okay. Don't be tempted to swap in nicer sounding words because they risk changing the meaning of the statement. A long, rambling sentence saying something useful is better than a meaningless tagline.

Remember, the aim of this proposition is to define your strategy for success. It's about what you're not as much as what you are. It needs to be strict in its thinking, having one red thread that weaves all the way from target client to competitor weakness.

If each section feels like a standalone idea, go back and work on it more. If there are multiple answers in a section just to stop people moaning, go back and work on it more. If the proposition statement feels like something any agency could say, go back and work on it more.

Still struggling with a weak-as-a-kitten proposition?

Look, this stuff is incredibly hard to do for your own agency. It's almost impossible to read the label from inside the jar. Sometimes the smarter play is to bring in some external expertise. Sure, you can find sleazy sales gurus, generalist new-business nobodies, or fluffy brand strategy folk anywhere. But they rarely help you define a standout and strategically sound proposition. Instead, expect a hasty proposition full of generic cliches and hyped-up claims ready to roll out asap. But this isn't about finding a quick angle or hook to hustle up some leads. It's about redefining your business so you're the obvious choice to win the kind of work you deserve.

So if you can't see the wood for the trees anymore...

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Good luck