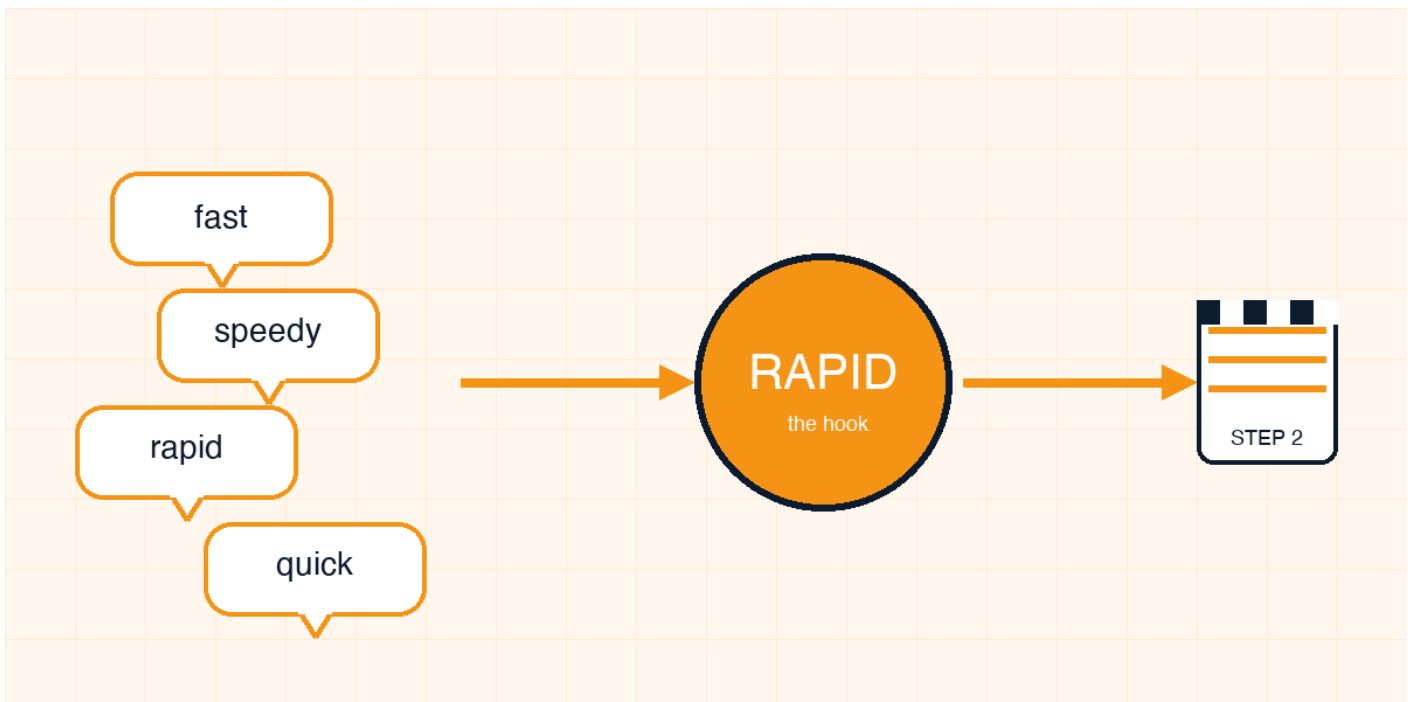


The Two-Step Positioning Survey

Why You Need To Ask Your Customers First

A field guide for marketers who are tired of guessing what their customers care about. Inside: the proven two-step survey methodology that built billion-dollar brands, two worked examples (TANK PHONE and the Daytona racing car), and the canonical 5 steps you can run on your own customer base in 48 hours.

You cannot position a brand. You can only build positioning around the words your customers already use.



Stu Sjouwerman
Founder & CEO, ReadingMinds.AI

#1 — Most Marketers Skip the Only Step That Matters

Every marketer learns the AIDA formula in school: Attention, Interest, Desire, Action. Almost every marketer then goes on to skip the first letter for the rest of their career. They write copy that tries to generate interest. They polish CTAs that try to drive action. They run campaigns that broadcast desire. And the conversion rates are mediocre, because no one is paying attention in the first place.

Attention is not earned by louder claims. It is earned by saying something the prospect already agrees with, in the prospect's own words, before you ever ask them to listen. That agreement is called the **hook**, and you find it by surveying the people who already chose your brand and can articulate why.



In today's tsunami of noise, you need to rise above the noise to get your message across. The hook is how you do it.

Why guessing fails

A founder we worked with advertised “Speed” as the headline benefit of his service. The service really was faster than the competition. But conversion rates were flat. We surveyed his customers. Every single one of them used the words “Rapid” and “Rapidly” instead. We changed the copy to use the customer's word. Conversion went up immediately. The product hadn't changed. The benefit hadn't changed. The *word* changed, and the word was the difference between a flat campaign and a profitable one.

An amusement park wanted to promote that it was “Safe.” The audience wanted “Trouble free and fun.” A construction company surveyed homeowners about kitchen remodels and used the actual customer wording in their ads. Sales went up 50%. None of these companies were short on data. They were short on the *specific words* the customer would respond to. That is the only thing a positioning survey is for.

#2 — The Hook Is Not The Message

The single most important distinction in this whitepaper is between the hook and the message.

Definition: HOOK

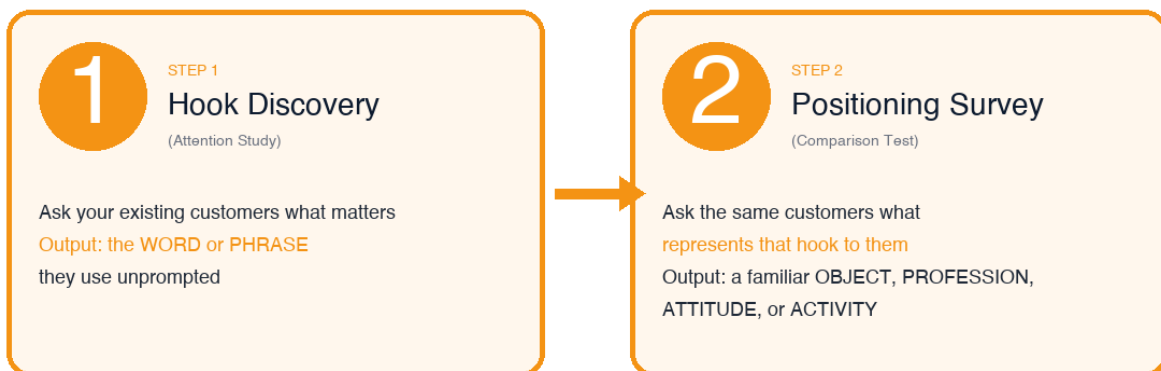
What your customer already agrees with. The phrase you use as the very first thing in your promo so the prospect thinks *“these guys speak my language.”* It earns you the right to be heard.

Definition: MESSAGE

Your pitch, the actual idea you want the customer to take action on. The message covers Interest and Desire in AIDA. The hook gets you in the door so the message can be heard.

Why existing customers, and why two surveys

Existing customers are the only audience that can give you a real hook. They have already chosen you, paid you, used your product, and formed an opinion. They can articulate, in their own unprompted vocabulary, what they value. Prospects can't do that yet. Panel respondents are guessing. Ries and Trout's positioning methodology has a hard precondition almost everyone misses: **you cannot do a real positioning survey without first having a hook.** So the process is two distinct surveys, run in order, against the same customer base.



Surveying your own customers is the single most valuable marketing action you will take this quarter.

#3 — Step 1: The Attention Study

Step 1 is called the Attention Study, also known as the Hook Discovery Study. The job of Step 1 is to surface the actual unprompted words and phrases your existing customers use to describe what they value about your brand. You do not give them a list to choose from. You do not put words in their mouths. You ask open-ended questions in second person and you tabulate the answers, grouping similar phrases into categories. The dominant category is your hook.

The questions that work

These are the foundational hook-generating questions. Adapt the bracketed pieces to your specific category and brand:

1. “What is the most important thing you look for in a [category]?”
2. “When you think about [your brand], what is the first thing that comes to mind?”
3. “Walk me through what specifically made you decide to choose [your brand]. Just one example.”
4. “If you could change one thing about [your brand], what would it be?”
5. “Think about the last time you used [your brand]. What stood out?”

WORKED EXAMPLE #1: TANK PHONE

From a \$0 startup to \$30 million in three years

A startup wanted to provide telephone systems to correctional facilities. The big telecom incumbents already owned the market, but the founder felt he could do a better job. We surveyed sheriffs and wardens across the United States and asked them what they wanted from an inmate phone system. The dominant unprompted answer was a single word: **INDESTRUCTIBLE**. The existing phones often broke, which created upset prisoners, fights, and bad PR. Indestructible was the hook. That word, in the customer's own voice, became the foundation of an entire brand. The startup went from \$0 to \$30 million in three years and became the largest independent provider of inmate phone systems in the country. (We will see how they used that hook in Step 2.)

#4 — Step 2: The Positioning Survey

Step 2 is the actual positioning survey. Now that you have the hook from Step 1, you go back to the same customer base and ask them what familiar object, profession, attitude, or activity represents that hook to them. You do not mention your product. You are looking for the comparison object you will position your brand *against, with, above, or below*. The customer's answer becomes the visual and verbal anchor of your entire campaign.

The canonical 5 steps

- 1 **Identify the demographic**
The audience you want to cause to have an instant opinion. Normally your existing customers.
- 2 **Define the kind of opinion**
Desirable, undesirable, must-have, waste of time. Pick one.
- 3 **Survey without naming your product**
Ask what they consider wonderful, popular, useful, or terrible. Surface attitudes, objects, professions, anything that could compare with your brand.
- 4 **Choose the majority answer**
From the dominant category, pick the object or activity they all firmly have an opinion on. Your ReadingMinds App will do the tabulation for you in the Analysis step of your survey, so the dominant category is surfaced automatically.
- 5 **Work out the bright idea**
Compare your product to that familiar object, profession, attitude, or activity. Above, with, below, against, or away from. Build the campaign on that comparison.

WORKED EXAMPLE #2: DAYTONA RACING CAR

Hook: speed. Comparison: a racing car blowing the Roadrunner off the road.

An internet service provider in the southeastern US wanted to win against Warner Brothers cable. Warner used Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner as advertising icons. We surveyed our client's prospects (medium-sized businesses) and the dominant hook was **speed**. They wanted fast internet. That was Step 1. For Step 2, we asked the same audience what represents speed to them. The answer: **a Daytona racing car**. We built an ad that showed our client's Daytona racing car blowing the Roadrunner off the road, with the Roadrunner bent over breathing heavily as the car blew by. Every element was supplied by the customers themselves. The hook came from Step 1. The comparison came from Step 2. The execution was the only thing that came from the marketing team.

The Tank Phone and the Daytona racing car had nothing in common except this: every word and every image came from the customer.

#5 — How To Run This On Your Own Customer Base

You can run a hook discovery survey on your existing customers in 48 hours. The whole methodology is summarized in five practical actions:

- 1 Pick 10 to 20 paying customers**
 Active customers, ideally 30+ days in. Not free trials. Not prospects. Not panel respondents.
- 2 Send them an interview link**
 A voice interview, not a written form. Voice captures the unprompted vocabulary, hesitations, and emotional turning points that text loses.
- 3 Use 5 hook-discovery questions**
 Open-ended, second person, neutral wording. Each question tied to a specific gap in your current positioning.
- 4 Tabulate by category**
 Group similar phrases together. “Fast”, “speedy”, and “rapid” all count as one category. The highest-percentage category is your hook.
- 5 Run Step 2 on the same customer base**
 Now ask what familiar object, profession, attitude, or activity represents that hook. The dominant answer becomes your campaign anchor.

Free Tool: Positioning Analyzer

Paste your domain and 1 to 3 competitors. ReadingMinds reads every public site, applies the Ries & Trout framework, and hands you a launch-ready Step 1 hook discovery survey for your existing customers in 60 seconds.
readingminds.ai/positioning-analyzer

Live Test Drive

Talk to Emma for 3 minutes about your biggest customer feedback challenge. See the ReadingMinds Expression Fingerprint, themes, and cited quotes she delivers from a real conversation.
readingminds.ai/live-test-drive

ABOUT READINGMINDS



ReadingMinds is the AI-native customer insight platform built for teams that need to understand what customers actually express, not just what they say. Emma, our AI voice interviewer, runs natural 3-minute conversations and captures the ReadingMinds Expression Fingerprint of every respondent across six emotions and intensity 1 to 9. Decision-ready customer truth in 48 hours, not 8 weeks. No permanent recordings stored.

Sources: Al Ries & Jack Trout, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* (1981). ReadingMinds Positioning Survey Canon, internal methodology document, ReadingMinds.AI, 2026.