

Positioning Is Memory Design

A Systemic Architecture for Strategic Positioning in Complex Decision Environments

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Abstract

Strategic positioning is commonly theorized as a problem of signal emission: actors communicate value and receptor systems evaluate what they receive. This article argues that this framing locates the decisive mechanism too late in the process. In consequential decision environments, the central problem is not only what actors emit but what occurs inside the receptor system after a signal arrives: how value is interpreted, classified, stored in operative memory and retrieved when a decision window opens.

Drawing on cybernetic theory (Wiener, Beer), predictive processing (Friston, Clark), organizational sensemaking (Weick), signaling theory (Spence) and bounded rationality (Simon), the article develops a systemic architecture organized around five interdependent variables—interpretation, legitimacy, eligibility, centrality and activation—operating on a common substrate: operative memory. It also introduces the Prism Effect, a geocognitive mechanism by which an actor's origin conditions interpretation before any deliberate signal is processed, and a dual entropic logic distinguishing positioning within cooperative systems from competition in adversarial environments.

Three practitioner-embedded cases across commercial, organizational and closed institutional settings are used for theory elaboration and analytic pattern matching. The article contributes to systems research by reframing strategic positioning as the architecture of retrievability: the disciplined design of conditions under which verified value becomes legible, classifiable, memorable and actionable inside decision systems.

Keywords: *strategic positioning; operative memory; cybernetics; decision systems; sensemaking; predictive processing; systems theory; legitimacy; retrievability*

1. The Problem the Field Has Not Solved

The dominant frameworks of strategic positioning begin with the same assumption: that the primary challenge facing an actor—a company, an institution, an individual, a nation—is one of communication. The actor has value. The market does not see it clearly enough. The solution is to communicate better, more consistently, with greater differentiation.

This assumption is not entirely wrong. It is incomplete and, in complex decision environments, often strategically misleading.

Ries and Trout (1981), whose formulation of positioning remains the dominant refer-

ence in marketing and communications, defined the discipline as the act of occupying a distinct place in the mind of the target audience. Their framework was a significant advance over undifferentiated mass communication. But it addresses only one layer of the problem: visibility and differentiation within an already receptive system.

Simon Anholt's (2007) nation branding framework extended the logic to sovereign actors, arguing that countries compete for attention, respect and trust in a global marketplace of perceptions. His contribution was to demonstrate that the same perceptual dynamics governing commercial brands apply to national actors. Yet that framework remains anchored in a communication paradigm: the problem is what the world sees; the solution is to manage what is projected.

Strategic communications as practiced by governments, defense establishments and major institutions operates on a similar premise. Even its most sophisticated variants—narrative strategy, influence operations, public diplomacy—tend to focus on message design and channel management rather than on the interpretive mechanisms of the receptor system itself.

Tim Wu's (2016) analysis of the attention economy documents the structural consequence of this paradigm at scale: when every actor optimizes for signal intensity and channel reach, the aggregate result is not better communication but noisier environments. The communication paradigm, applied universally, produces the conditions that make communication insufficient.

More recent scholarship has moved well beyond simple message design. Keller's (1993) model of customer-based brand equity already conceptualizes brand knowledge through an associative network memory model, and the category-creation literature in strategic management treats market categories as actively constructed rather than given (Durand & Khaire, 2017). This article builds on those advances rather than displacing them. Yet even they stop short of the problem isolated here: they theorize how audiences store brands or how categories form, not how a specific actor is rendered retrievable, under the correct category, inside the operative memory of the decision system that must select it.

That problem is the following: an actor can have real, substantial, verified value—production capacity, technical expertise, institutional legitimacy, proven capability—and remain systematically invisible to the decision systems that should be selecting it. Not because it communicates poorly, but because the system is not reading it correctly.

The problem is not what the actor says. The problem is how the system interprets what the actor is. This is a categorically different problem and it requires a categorically different framework.

This article proposes that framework. Its central thesis is that strategic positioning is memory design: the disciplined architecture of conditions under which an actor's value is interpreted correctly, stored in operative memory under the right category, and retrieved at the moment of decision. The paper develops this thesis through a distinction between exposure and position; a geocognitive mechanism—the Prism Effect—that conditions interpretation before it begins; a systemic architecture of five operational variables upon a common substrate; a cybernetic account of the intervention mechanism; and three practitioner-embedded cases across scales.

1.1 Contribution and Scope

The article makes four contributions. First, it relocates positioning from the sender-centric problem of message design to the receptor-system problem of memory formation and retrieval. Second, it specifies operative memory as the common substrate through which interpretation, legitimacy, eligibility, centrality and activation become strategically consequential. Third, it identifies the Prism Effect as a prior condition that shapes how signals are processed before framing, persuasion or evaluation formally begin. Fourth, it distinguishes between two entropic contexts—positioning within a cooperative or neutral system and competing against an adversarial system—whose intervention logics are structurally different.

The scope of the argument is deliberately bounded. The claim is not that communication, branding or signaling are irrelevant. Rather, the claim is that their effectiveness depends on the architecture of the receptor system that receives, classifies and stores them. Positioning is therefore treated here as a systems problem: not how an actor speaks to an audience, but how a decision system comes to remember an actor as the appropriate answer to a class of needs, opportunities or uncertainties.

1.2 A Necessary Ethical Boundary

Because this paper deals with memory, interpretation and decision systems, a boundary must be stated at the outset. Strategic positioning, as defined here, is not the manipulation of memory. It is the disciplined design of conditions under which verified value becomes legible, classifiable, retrievable and actionable within a decision system. Its ethical limit is clear: the architecture may amplify, clarify, contextualize and validate real value; it cannot legitimately fabricate value that the actor does not possess.

This distinction is operational. Systems eventually test what they have stored. If the installed interpretation is not supported by the actor's actual capability, behavior and continuity, the system updates against the actor. False positioning therefore creates negative memory. Durable position can only be built on value that can survive retrieval, use and verification.

2. The Foundational Distinction: Position vs. Exposure

There is a difference that the existing literature has not named with sufficient precision. It is the difference between exposure and position.

Exposure is what occurs when a signal reaches a receptor system. It is measurable in impressions, reach, awareness and recall. It is what most communication strategies optimize for. Position is what occurs when a signal is stored by the receptor system under a specific category of meaning and becomes retrievable at the moment of decision.

The distinction matters because the two phenomena operate through different mechanisms. Exposure is a function of signal intensity and channel reach. Position is a function of how the receptor system processes, classifies and stores the signal in operative memory. Exposure reaches the system. Position enters the system's internal search architecture.

A signal that reaches a system but does not enter its memory does not produce the intended position. It passes. The system registers it and discards it, not necessarily because it is irrelevant, but because it does not connect with an existing predictive model,

does not arrive from a source the system has assigned high precision to (precision, in the predictive-processing sense used throughout this article, denotes the confidence weight a system attaches to a source, not the exactness of a message), or does not arrive when the system's cognitive frame is open to that category of input. The system does not stop classifying; it continues to build its model of the actor from whatever other signals are available, including the absence of a compelling one.

Contemporary neuroscience provides the formal basis for this distinction. Karl Friston's (2010) free energy principle establishes that biological systems do not passively receive information. They actively predict it. The brain generates hypotheses about what it is about to perceive, based on accumulated memory, and sensory input reports the discrepancy between what was predicted and what arrived. Andy Clark's (2016) synthesis under the concept of 'surfing uncertainty' makes the implication explicit: perception is not reception. It is controlled hallucination, continuously corrected by incoming evidence.

The implication for strategic positioning is precise: a signal that does not interact with the receptor's existing predictive model is not processed as information. It is filtered as noise before reaching conscious evaluation. Positioning an actor is therefore not fundamentally a problem of signal emission. It is a problem of model interaction: what is the receptor system already predicting, and how must the signal be designed to produce the precise degree of prediction error that triggers model updating without triggering rejection?

Position is not a state of awareness. It is a state of memory. Specifically, it is the condition in which an actor is stored in the operative memory of a decision system under a category that makes it retrievable when a need arises, an opportunity opens, or an uncertainty requires resolution.

Daniel Kahneman's (2011) dual-process framework clarifies the operational difference. Exposure operates primarily in the register of System 1—fast, automatic, recognition-based processing. Position requires installation in the structures that System 2 draws upon when deliberate evaluation is needed: categorized, validated, retrievable representations that allow a decision-maker to select, compare and act. The difference between the two conditions is the difference between being seen and being called.

2.1 Positioning Is Not Optional

A critical implication follows. Positioning is not a facultative activity. The receptor system does not wait for the actor to design its signals before classifying it. Systems read continuously. They interpret every signal that reaches them—deliberate or accidental, designed or emitted by default—and they store the resulting classification in operative memory whether the actor intended that classification or not.

This means that every actor already has a position, or more precisely, every actor that has been perceived by a decision system already occupies a category in that system's memory. The question is not whether the actor will be classified. The question is whether the actor participates in determining the terms of that classification or abandons the process to the system's default mechanisms.

When the actor does not intervene, position still forms. It sediments naturally from

whatever signals the system captures: a first impression, an association with a context, an inference from origin, a comparison with a more familiar actor, a piece of second-hand information. The resulting position may be inaccurate, incomplete, or detrimental to the actor, but it will still influence how the system responds when a decision involving the actor arises.

What is facultative is not the existence of position. What is facultative is the architecture. The actor can choose to identify the signals most likely to produce the correct classification, and to design and administer their sustained, coherent dissemination over time. Professional intervention is therefore not an act of manipulation imposed on a neutral process. It is the disciplined alternative to an undisciplined process that will produce a classification regardless.

3. The Prism Effect: Origin as Geocognitive Multiplier

Before any signal the actor emits reaches the receptor system, something precedes it. The system already holds a model of the actor's origin—geographic, institutional, cultural, sectorial, relational. That model is not neutral. It acts as a prism through which every subsequent signal is refracted before it is processed.

This is the Prism Effect: the mechanism by which origin conditions the interpretation of value before interpretation formally begins.

The relationship between origin and perceived value has been documented in international marketing through the Country-of-Origin effect: the observation that geographic provenance systematically influences consumer evaluation of quality, reliability and desirability. Croué (2012) treated origin as a cognitive shortcut: a pre-existing model that the receptor system applies before direct evaluation occurs.

The Prism Effect extends that insight in three ways. First, it extends the scope of the actor. The relevant origin is not only geographic; it may be institutional, sectorial, relational or cultural. Second, it extends the mechanism. Origin does not merely influence evaluation; it conditions the processing architecture through which subsequent signals are received, classified and stored. Third, it extends the typology of effects. Origin does not produce a single directional bias; it produces distinct prior conditions depending on the relationship between the actor's origin and the receptor system's existing models.

This extension must be differentiated from categorical framing in strategic management. Cornelissen and Werner (2014) show that organizations are evaluated through available categorical templates and that actors can influence category assignment through framing. The Prism Effect addresses a prior problem: the predictive prior the receptor system applies before any presentation begins. Framing operates on the prediction error—the discrepancy between what was expected and what arrived. The Prism Effect operates on the prior itself. An actor whose origin produces a strong Reduction or Distortion prior faces not merely a framing problem, but a prior problem.

3.1 Four Conditions of Origin

Transparency occurs when clear, recognized, congruent origin produces legitimacy before any signal arrives. The system assigns high precision to the source immediately.

Distortion occurs when origin carries prejudice, conflict or incongruence. Signals are processed through a biased frame that content alone cannot correct.

Reduction occurs when weak, unknown or negatively coded origin produces distrust or irrelevance before evaluation begins. The system assigns low precision by default.

Premium occurs when potent, prestigious or symbolically resonant origin produces preference and amplified perceived value. The system assigns elevated precision before direct interaction.

The Prism Effect is therefore a variable of structural priming. An actor whose origin produces Reduction or Distortion requires more evidence, from more validated sources, across more contexts, than an actor whose origin produces Transparency or Premium. The diagnostic phase of any positioning intervention must therefore map the actor's origin prism before designing any signal sequence: what is the system already inferring from where the actor comes from, who introduced it, what institutional frame surrounds it, and what symbolic codes it carries by default?

In Friston's terms, the Prism Effect is the prior. All subsequent prediction errors are processed relative to that prior. Origin is not a datum. It is a geocognitive multiplier.

3.2 Strategic Implications

The strategic implication is this: before designing the architecture of positioning, the architect must answer a prior question—what prism is the system already applying to this actor? That answer determines not only the sequence of intervention but its entire structure. A Premium prism amplifies every subsequent signal. A Reduction prism attenuates it. A Distortion prism bends it. Only a transparent origin allows signals to reach the system without structural interference.

Origin can be partially redesigned through institutional association, relational architecture, contextual embedding and symbolic recoding. But it cannot be ignored. An intervention that does not account for the prism condition is not strategic positioning. It is signal emission into a distorted channel.

4. The Systemic Architecture: Five Operational Variables Upon a Common Substrate

Strategic positioning, understood as memory design, operates through a systemic architecture organized around a single substrate and five operational variables (Figure 1). The substrate is operative memory. The variables are interpretation, legitimacy, eligibility, centrality and activation. They are not sequential steps or a checklist. They are interdependent dimensions of one system: each conditions the others, and all converge on a common outcome—the installation of a stable interpretation of the actor's value in the operative memory of the decision system.

Memory is not a variable among others. It is the condition of existence of all five. Interpretation, legitimacy, eligibility, centrality and activation determine what enters memory, how it is stored, under what category, with what assigned precision, and from where it is retrieved. Without installation in operative memory, the variables may operate communicationally but they do not position.

The intervention does not optimize exposure. It designs the conditions under which verified value becomes legible, stored and retrieved by the decision system.

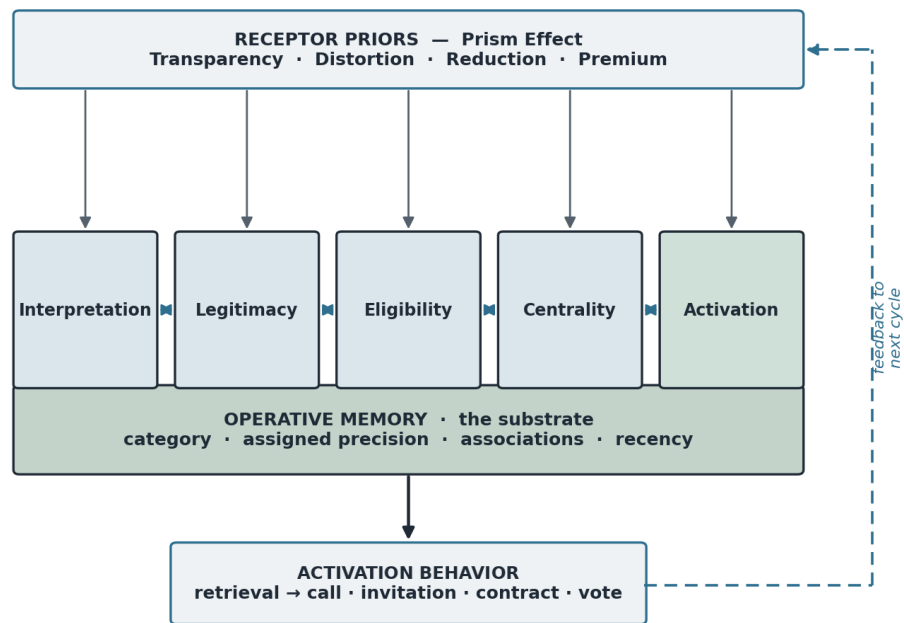


Figure 1. Systemic architecture of strategic positioning as memory design. The model represents the movement from receptor priors through operational variables into operative memory and activation behavior, with feedback returning to the next intervention cycle.

4.1 Interpretation

Every system that makes decisions reads actors through interpretive frames structured by accumulated memory, prior experience, cultural codes, institutional categories and cognitive shortcuts. These frames determine what the system sees when it encounters an actor, what category it assigns, what associations it activates and what value it infers.

Weick's (1995) work on sensemaking is essential here: organizations do not simply receive facts and decide; they enact, select and retain meanings that reduce ambiguity and enable action. The actor is not entering an empty mind or neutral market. It is entering an ongoing process of sensemaking in which the receptor system is already deciding what kind of thing this actor is and whether taking it seriously would have consequences.

This intersection between sensemaking and predictive processing aligns with work on dynamic capabilities, managerial cognition and behavioral strategy (Teece, 2007; Helfat & Peteraf, 2015; Gavetti, 2012). Strategic action depends not only on resources but on sensing, interpretation, categorization and updating. Positioning operates upstream of choice: it shapes the conditions under which an actor becomes available as a possible strategic option.

The first variable is interpretation: how the system is currently reading the actor, and how that reading must change. Changing interpretation does not mean changing what the actor communicates. It means redesigning the contextual, symbolic, relational and institutional signals that activate a different frame before the actor even speaks.

4.2 Legitimacy

Interpretation alone is insufficient. A system may understand what an actor is and still question whether it has the right to occupy that position. Legitimacy answers that question, not in the actor's own voice, but in the structure of signals surrounding it.

Legitimacy is not declared. It is inferred. The receptor system reads who validates the actor, in what contexts it appears, with whom it associates, what institutional structures surround it and what symbols it carries. Legitimacy is therefore ecosystemic, not individual. It is produced by the architecture of contexts, validators and associations within which the actor is embedded.

4.3 Validation Architecture

Legitimacy becomes operative through validation architecture: the structured arrangement of external confirmations that allows the receptor system to assign higher precision to the actor's signals. Spence's (1973) signaling theory explains why individual signals matter only when the receptor can infer that they are costly, credible or difficult to fake. Strategic positioning extends this logic from the isolated costly signal to the convergent structure: not which single signal is credible enough, but which arrangement of multiple signals, from multiple independent sources, across multiple contexts, produces corroboration the receptor cannot attribute to chance, manipulation or isolated effort.

This builds upon but extends Suchman's (1995) treatment of organizational legitimacy. Suchman describes the conditions under which legitimacy is conferred or withdrawn at the field level. Validation architecture treats the sourcing, sequencing and convergence of external confirmations as design variables available to the positioning architect. The operative unit is not the legitimacy judgment alone. It is the convergence.

A university program, a technical laboratory, a respected peer, a regulatory context, a serious media platform, a closed professional forum, a client use case and a repeated operational behavior may each function as a validation stratum. Their value lies in cumulative convergence: different sources, different contexts, one increasingly coherent reading.

4.4 Eligibility

Legitimacy establishes that an actor belongs in a category. Eligibility establishes that it is a viable option when a decision must be made. These are distinct conditions. An actor can be recognized as legitimate without being retrieved when a specific opportunity arises.

Eligibility is an indexing problem before it is a selection problem: the actor must be stored under the category the system will actually search when that class of decision appears. This is consistent with Simon's bounded rationality (1947, 1955) and March and Simon's (1958) theory of organizational decision-making. Organizations rarely optimize across all possible alternatives. They search under constraints, satisfice under pressure and rely on remembered options that appear adequate, legitimate and available.

The construct is complementary to Ocasio's (1997) attention-based view of the firm. Attention opens a window. Eligibility determines which actors are indexed in memory in a form that allows them to appear through that window when it opens. Designing eligibility means designing the conditions under which the actor enters and remains in

the correct index of operative memory relative to the decision cycles of the target system.

4.5 Centrality

Eligibility means being considered. Centrality means being the reference point around which the system organizes its interpretation of a domain. It is the difference between being an option and being the option that defines the category.

A central actor is not merely present in memory; it is the anchor from which other actors are evaluated. Centrality is not achieved by volume of communication. It is achieved by consistently occupying the interpretive position: framing conversations, producing knowledge that others use, and appearing at the intersections where the system's most important decisions are made. A central actor does not follow the conversation. It frames it.

4.6 The Substrate: Memory

Operative memory is not passive storage. It is selective, hierarchical and associative. It retains what makes sense within existing predictive models; what repeats with coherence; what has been validated by trusted sources; what resolved a tension or answered a question; and what arrived at the right moment, from the right context, through the right channel.

Memory functions as a retrieval engine. When a decision system faces a need, an opportunity or an uncertainty, it does not conduct an exhaustive search of reality. It searches its own indexed memory: categories, associations, validators, recency, assigned precision and prior successful resolutions. Position exists when the actor has been stored under the category that the system will query when that class of decision arises. Strategic positioning is therefore not only the installation of meaning in memory. It is the architecture of retrievability.

The concept of operative memory differs from Prahalad and Bettis's (1986) dominant logic. Dominant logic describes the cognitive schema through which an organization's senior managers process environmental information and allocate resources. Operative memory describes what the receptor has stored about specific external actors, under what category, and with what precision, such that those actors become retrievable or invisible at the moment of decision. Strategic positioning intervenes in that gap: not in the dominant logic itself, but in the conditions under which a specific actor is stored and retrieved within it.

Operative memory must equally be distinguished from organizational memory as theorized by Walsh and Ungson (1991). Their construct concerns how an organization stores, retains and retrieves its own accumulated knowledge through processes of acquisition, retention and retrieval. Operative memory is not the organization's memory of itself but the receptor system's memory of external actors: the category, the assigned precision and the associations under which a given actor is held, such that it surfaces or fails to surface when a class of decision arises. The distinction from Keller's (1993) associative network memory model is parallel. Keller models the consumer-side associations attached to a brand; operative memory models the retrievability of a specific actor within a deciding system's search architecture. Strategic positioning intervenes on that retrievability, not on the organization's internal knowledge stores and not on brand

associations alone.

4.7 Activation

Activation is the confirmation that position exists. It occurs when the decision system—facing a need, opportunity, problem or uncertainty—retrieves the actor from operative memory and converts that retrieval into behavior: a call, an invitation, a contract, an alliance, a recommendation, a vote, a purchase.

Activation is not produced by the actor. It is produced by the system. This is the most important distinction between positioning and persuasion. Persuasion attempts to move the system toward a decision through direct pressure. Positioning designs the conditions under which the system moves on its own because the actor is already stored as the natural response to that class of decision.

Beer's Viable System Model provides a structural account of the activation moment (Beer, 1959, 1972). Beer's algedonic channel—the pathway that carries urgent, unfiltered alerts across organizational levels—describes how a need, crisis or time-sensitive opportunity bypasses routine processing and triggers immediate search in operative memory. Under algedonic conditions, only what has been installed with sufficient depth, coherence and recency survives retrieval. This is an explicit extension of Beer's construct, and it should be marked as such: in its original formulation the algedonic signal is an internal pain-or-pleasure alert within a viable system's own recursion, not a mechanism for retrieving external actors. The transposition claimed here is deliberately narrow. The same priority-interrupt logic that forces a system to attend to an urgent internal state also governs which externally stored options are queried first when that urgency demands a response.

When activation occurs without the actor having initiated the contact, position is confirmed. The system called. The system invited. The system chose. Not because it was pushed. Because it remembered correctly.

5. Perceptual Layering: The Temporal Architecture of Position

Strategic positioning does not occur as a single event. It accumulates as layers.

Each signal, context, validator and resolved tension deposits a stratum over the previous ones. No single layer produces position. Durable position is produced not by the intensity of any single intervention but by the coherence and depth of accumulated strata. Thickness—the density of corroborating layers in the receptor system's memory—converts perception into structural conviction.

This layering logic has a direct corollary in Shannon's information theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1949): structural redundancy is not repetition; it is resilience. A message that arrives through a single channel, from a single source, at a single moment is fragile. A position constructed through multiple coherent signals, from multiple validated sources, across multiple contexts and time intervals is resistant to interference.

Layering also explains why durable position cannot be produced by campaigns. A campaign is an event with a defined beginning and end. Layering is a process with no end. Each new signal either reinforces or erodes existing strata. A dormant actor does not maintain position. Its strata decay as the system's predictive model updates around more active inputs.

The architecture can only be as stable as the actor who inhabits it. Discontinuous emission produces discontinuous position. Consistency is not a virtue. It is a structural requirement.

5.1 The Law of Proportionality

The depth of positioning achieved is directly proportional to the sustained coherence of the actor's commitment to the process. Three variables govern this relationship: coherence of the signal architecture, duration of sustained emission, and precision assigned by the receptor system to the actor's signals.

These variables are not independent, and their relationship is not additive. A high value on any two cannot compensate for a zero on the third. An actor that emits coherent signals for a sustained period, but from a source the receptor assigns zero precision to, will not position. An actor of high assigned precision that emits incoherent signals will degrade its own precision over time. On the other hand, an actor of high coherence and high precision that operates for an insufficient duration will not accumulate the strata required for a durable position. The formal specification and empirical testing of this multiplicative structure constitute a priority line of inquiry addressed in Section 9.

6. The Cybernetic Mechanism: Intervening in the Interpretive Chain

The five-variable model describes what strategic positioning operates on. This section describes how it operates. The mechanism is cybernetic.

Norbert Wiener's formulation of cybernetics (1948, 1950) established that systems capable of adaptive behavior share a common architecture: input, processing, output and feedback. The system receives signals from its environment, processes them against accumulated internal state, produces a response, and uses the consequences of that response to adjust future processing.

For strategic positioning, this means that the receptor system—a market, institution, board or individual decision-maker—is not a passive audience. It processes every signal against accumulated memory, generates an interpretation, and uses that interpretation to guide future behavior. Implicitly, it asks: does this signal match my existing model? If yes, the model is reinforced. If the discrepancy is manageable, the model updates. If the discrepancy is excessive, the signal is rejected as noise or threat.

A methodological clarification is necessary. Friston's free energy principle and Clark's predictive processing framework describe mechanisms at the neural level. This article does not claim neurological identity between brains, organizations and markets. It uses predictive processing by structural analogy: adaptive systems maintain internal models, compare incoming signals with those models, assign differential credibility to sources and update only when discrepancies become sufficiently salient and reliable. Beer's Viable System Model supports the transposition at the organizational level by showing how systems recurse, model environments and adapt through feedback. Research on managerial and organizational cognition further supports this extension: Gavetti and Levinthal (2000), Walsh (1995) and related work show that organizations search through accumulated models, analogies and knowledge structures rather than through exhaustive reality scans. The relevant issue is therefore not substrate identity, but architectural correspondence. What predictive processing contributes that sensemaking and

signaling theory do not is one specific, load-bearing element: the concept of assigned precision, the confidence weight a system places on a source, which governs whether a discrepant signal updates the model or is filtered before it can. That single mechanism is what the present framework depends on, and it is developed as such throughout. Where predictive processing is invoked beyond this point, it functions as illustrative analogy and not as a claim of identical mechanism.

6.1 The Point of Intervention

The conventional communication paradigm intervenes at the output end of the actor's system: it designs what the actor emits. Strategic positioning intervenes at the input end of the receptor system: it redesigns the conditions under which the signal enters the receptor's processing chain.

The difference is architectural. One approach asks: what should we say? The other asks: what must be true about the receptor's state before our signal arrives, so that when it arrives it is processed correctly? This requires mapping the receptor's current model of the actor, the categories it uses, the signals it assigns high precision to, the validators it trusts, and the gaps between what it expects and what it is receiving. Those gaps are the entry points of intervention.

6.2 Designing Prediction Errors

Friston's framework establishes that systems update their models through prediction error: the discrepancy between what was predicted and what arrived. But not all prediction errors produce updating. The system modulates the weight it assigns to prediction errors based on the perceived reliability of the source. A source assigned high precision produces model-updating prediction errors. A source assigned low precision produces discrepancies that are filtered before reaching the updating mechanism.

The cybernetic mechanism of strategic positioning is therefore a calibrated sequence of prediction errors: each one slightly larger than the system's current model predicts, each arriving from a source of sufficient assigned precision, each depositing a layer in operative memory, and together shifting the receptor system's model of the actor from its current state to the target state.

6.3 Systemic Homeostasis and Cognitive Friction

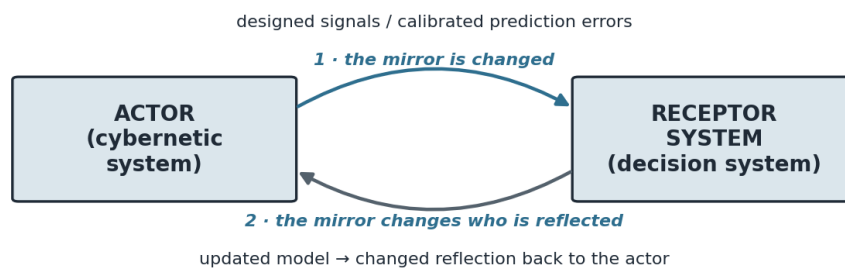
Receptor systems do not update automatically when discrepant evidence arrives. They exhibit systemic homeostasis: the tendency to preserve the stability of existing categories, routines, priors and institutional interpretations when the cost of updating appears higher than the cost of filtering the new signal. Many contradictory signals are assimilated as anomalies, noise, exceptions or threats.

Strategic positioning must therefore operate within a critical saliency zone: sufficiently discrepant to force attention and updating; sufficiently validated to avoid rejection; and sufficiently coherent with trusted external signals to bypass homeostatic stabilization. This explains why isolated signals rarely reposition actors, why validation architecture must precede ambitious interpretation change, and why sequence is structural rather than tactical.

6.4 The Feedback Loop and the Bidirectional Mirror

As signals enter the receptor system and begin to shift its model, receptor behavior changes. It assigns higher precision to the actor's signals, includes the actor in conversations from which it had been excluded, and retrieves the actor in contexts where it previously retrieved others. A positioning process without feedback operates blind: feedback is the instrument through which the intervention calibrates itself to the actual state of the receptor system.

The feedback loop also produces a second-order effect. As the receptor system changes its model of the actor, the actor receives a different reflection of itself. The system functions as a mirror (Figure 2). The actor's changed self-understanding modifies its internal state, confidence, behavior and signals. Those altered signals reinforce the receptor's updated model. The intervention therefore does not merely adjust the receptor's model of the actor; it can adjust the actor's model of itself. First the mirror is changed; then the mirror changes who is reflected in it.



Recursive loop: altered self-understanding modifies the actor's signals, which reinforce the receptor's updated model.

Figure 2. The feedback loop and the bidirectional mirror. The actor's designed signals shift the receptor system's model of the actor; the receptor's updated model returns a changed reflection to the actor, whose altered signals in turn reinforce the update in a recursive loop.

6.5 Decision Environment Mapping

The practical translation of this mechanism is Decision Environment Mapping. Before any intervention is designed, the architect must map who actually decides, who influences the decision, what categories the system uses, what it already remembers, which sources it assigns high precision to, which validators it trusts, what anxieties shape its current model, which moments open decision windows, and which channels produce classification rather than mere exposure.

The first deliverable is not a message, campaign or narrative. It is a model of the receptor system's interpretive architecture. Because positioning is not optional, this mapping must also include the position that already exists: the classification formed from uncontrolled signals, default inferences, origin prism or second-hand information. The task is to determine what must be reinforced, corrected or displaced.

6.6 The Actor as Cybernetic System

The actor itself is also a cybernetic system, and its internal state conditions the quality of the signals it emits. An actor whose behavior across contexts contradicts its claimed position produces exactly the kind of noise that the receptor system's filtering mechanisms are designed to discard.

There is no permanent architectural solution to an incoherent actor. Inconsistency can be managed, contained and partially compensated, but only for a time. Eventually the receptor system accumulates enough contradictory strata to degrade the assigned precision of the source. The sophistication of the external intervention is therefore bounded by the internal coherence of the actor.

7. Entropy as Strategic Variable: Two Distinct Scenarios

Shannon's information theory defines entropy as the measure of uncertainty in a system. High entropy means many possible states—maximum uncertainty and unpredictability. Low entropy means fewer possible states—stability, coherence and predictability.

Entropy is a strategic variable. But its application differs fundamentally depending on the nature of the relationship between the actor and the system it is operating within. Conflating two distinct scenarios produces analytical confusion and operational error.

The two scenarios are positioning within a system and competition against an adversarial system (Figure 3). They require opposite approaches to the receptor's entropy and identical approaches to the actor's.

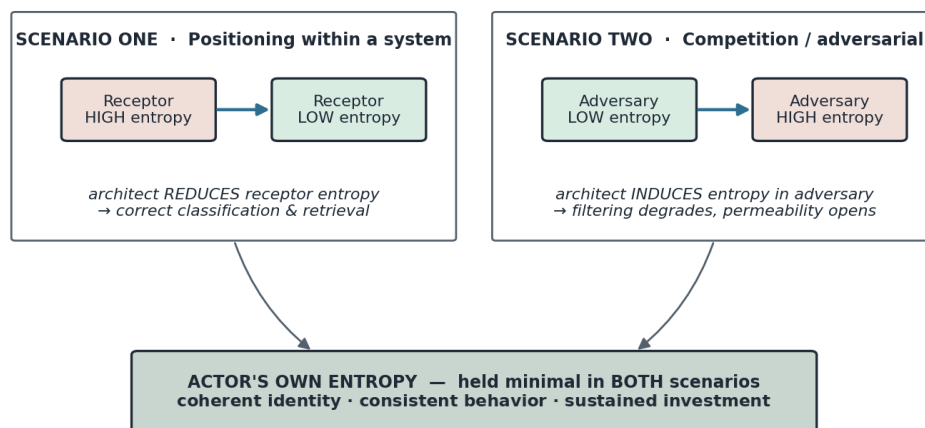


Figure 3. The dual entropic logic. In positioning within a system the architect reduces the receptor's entropy to enable correct classification and retrieval; in competition the architect induces entropy in the adversary to degrade its filtering and open permeability. The actor's own entropy is held minimal in both scenarios.

7.1 Scenario One: Positioning Within a System

The strategic positioning architect does not compete with the receptor system. The relationship is not adversarial. The architect works with the system's own logic—its predictive models, classification mechanisms and memory architecture—to produce the correct reading of the actor's value.

In this scenario, a receptor system in high entropy is not an opportunity. It is an obstacle. A system overwhelmed by noise, internal contradiction and unresolved uncertainty cannot classify incoming signals with precision, store them under the correct category, or retrieve them reliably at the moment of decision.

The architect's task is therefore to reduce the receptor's entropy sufficiently for the system to process the actor's signals correctly. This means arriving with clarity when the system is confused, with coherence when it is fragmented, and with a signal that fits an available category rather than demanding the creation of a new one. The positioning architect does not fight the system. The architect makes the system's own logic work in favor of the actor.

7.2 Scenario Two: Competition and Adversarial Environments

The logic reverses in competitive or adversarial contexts—market displacement, negotiation under resistance, influence in an environment where an incumbent is actively defending its position. Here an opposing system operates with its own predictive models, assigned precision hierarchies and memory architecture. That system is not neutral. It filters, resists and classifies incoming signals in ways that protect its existing model.

In this context, inducing entropy in the opposing system is a legitimate and precise strategic tool. A system under high entropy—internal contradictions surfaced, certainties destabilized, attention fragmented across demands—loses coherent filtering capacity. Parr, Pezzulo and Friston (2022) show that excessive unresolved prediction error can degrade sophisticated active inference. The NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence's (2021) work on cognitive warfare describes the analogous state-level mechanism: operations that target an opponent's interpretive and decision architecture seek to induce entropic overload that degrades classification, memory and coherent response.

A competitor forced into high entropy cannot maintain a stable model of the competitive landscape. Its decision cycles lengthen. Its confidence in existing categories erodes. In that erosion, space opens for a new signal—correctly designed and correctly timed—to install a new interpretation in the systems that matter.

7.3 The Actor's Entropy: Constant Across Both Scenarios

What does not change between the two scenarios is the requirement for the actor's own entropy to remain minimal.

Low entropy in the actor produces clarity. Clarity produces decisional speed. Decisional speed produces consistency of action. Consistency of action produces coherent signal emission. Coherent signal emission produces higher assigned precision in the receptor system, whether that system is being worked with or competed against.

Low entropy in the actor is not a psychological state. It is a systemic condition produced by architectural discipline: coherent identity, consistent behavior across contexts, sustained investment proportional to declared objectives, and a feedback mechanism that allows continuous calibration. Identity is the internal architecture that keeps entropy low under environmental pressure. It determines what the actor accepts, refuses, sustains, invests in and repeats when conditions become ambiguous or costly.

Beer's Viable System Model (1972, 1975) provides the structural complement: an actor with a well-functioning System 4—robust environmental intelligence—and a co-

herent System 5—stable identity and values—operates with low entropy not because it ignores complexity, but because it has the internal architecture to process complexity without being destabilized by it.

The summary is simple: in positioning, work with the system's logic and reduce its noise. In competition, introduce complexity into the adversary's system while maintaining your own coherence. In both cases, the actor's minimum entropy is not a preference. It is the non-negotiable structural condition of effective intervention.

7.4 Ethical Extension of the Dual Entropic Logic

The dual entropic logic requires a corresponding ethical extension. In Scenario One, the architect may amplify real value but cannot fabricate it. Scenario Two introduces a harder question: if inducing entropy in an adversarial system is legitimate, what prevents it from becoming manipulation? The answer is structural. The architect does not fabricate a false model in the adversary's system; the architect surfaces contradictions, ambiguities and unresolved tensions that already exist. The ethical constraint therefore holds across both scenarios: the architect operates on what is real. In positioning, the real is the actor's value. In competition, the real is the adversary's incoherence. What remains impermissible in both cases is fabrication.

8. Practitioner-Embedded Cases: Three Scales of Intervention

8.1 Methodological Note

The following cases are drawn from the author's direct consulting practice over three decades. They employ a practitioner-embedded theory-building approach informed by action research, systemic action research and soft systems methodology (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Checkland, 1981; Flood, 2010). The purpose is theory elaboration rather than statistical generalization (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017), and the analytic logic is abductive rather than purely inductive or deductive (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012): observed regularities in practice are matched against candidate mechanisms and refined iteratively. The cases are used to make visible the mechanisms through which changes in signal context, validation architecture, sequence and memory indexing are followed by changes in receptor-system classification, retrieval or activation behavior.

The unit of analysis is not client success as such, but change in the receptor system's treatment of the actor. Each case is therefore reconstructed through the same analytic template, consistent with established case-based theory-building method (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018): (1) the initial classification problem, (2) the receptor system and its relevant decision architecture, (3) the intervention that altered the conditions of interpretation, (4) the mechanism by which the intervention is theorized to have operated, (5) the observable shift in classification, retrieval or activation and (6) the principal boundary condition or alternative explanation.

The evidentiary logic is analytic rather than causal-experimental. Because the interventions occurred in live organizational and institutional settings, the cases cannot isolate one variable under controlled conditions. The claim is correspondingly bounded: the cases do not prove that any single signal caused the observed outcome. They show patterned consistency between the proposed architecture and observed changes across

three scales of intervention. This is the appropriate evidentiary standard for an exploratory theory-building article whose primary contribution is conceptual architecture. It also entails an explicit condition of disconfirmation. The framework predicts that durable position requires the joint presence of coherent signal architecture, sufficient duration and adequate assigned precision; it would be disconfirmed by cases in which all three are satisfied yet no change in retrieval or activation follows, or in which durable retrieval is achieved in their combined absence. The three cases presented here do not supply that discriminating variation—they were drawn from successful engagements—and therefore corroborate the architecture without yet testing it against its own failure conditions. Cases sampled on the predictor variables rather than on the outcome are required for that test, a point returned to in the research agenda.

Confidentiality also shapes the presentation. Institutions and individuals are described by systemic role rather than by name. This anonymization limits independent replication of the cases, but it does not remove the analytic value of the mechanisms because the relevant information is the configuration of the receptor system, the intervention sequence and the behavioral evidence of retrieval or activation. The limitation is addressed again in the boundary conditions and research agenda, where the need for independent empirical testing is made explicit.

8.2 Case One: The Easter Egg—Perceptual Activation Through Contextual Signaling

The first case concerns a newly established company that, in 2006, had built a production facility for an industrial ingredient used across multiple food and beverage sectors. The company possessed real production capacity, technical quality and infrastructure documented to international standards. Contemporary technical documentation confirmed that the asset already had substantive value. Yet the market did not respond. The founding strategic brief described the company's positioning as nonexistent. Potential clients existed, but transactions were not occurring.

The classification problem was precise. Delivered as a standard industrial sample, through standard commercial channels, the product was processed inside the buying system as one input among many: interchangeable, price-driven and replaceable. The market was dominated by an incumbent with more than five decades of presence and near-total market share. The new entrant had no assigned precision in the receptor systems that mattered. Its signals entered an existing procurement frame in which incumbency, habit and technical equivalence all worked against model updating.

Decision-environment mapping showed that the buying process was not located in a single person or function. Research and development, technical evaluators, procurement and final decision-makers all participated, but each function applied a different interpretive frame to the same product. The standard sample reached technical evaluation, but it did not generate a shared organizational memory. It produced exposure without position: the system could register the product without storing it under a category that would make it retrievable when an opportunity arose.

The intervention therefore redefined the frame of encounter. For Easter, instead of sending a standard sample, the product was transformed into a symbolic object. A small glass bottle, designed to resemble a high-end perfume sample, was filled with the prod-

uct and labeled with its technical specifications. The bottle was placed inside a chocolate Easter egg, wrapped in transparent packaging, so that the object inside could be perceived through subtle movement. The signal was deployed simultaneously across the decision system—R&D, technical evaluators, procurement and decision-makers—generating cross-functional conversation before any formal evaluation process began.

The mechanism was not novelty for its own sake. It was a calibrated prediction error within a culturally activated frame. The recipient was already configured for gift, surprise and discovery. The product entered that frame rather than the industrial procurement frame. The discrepancy was unexpected enough to force attention, but familiar and legitimate enough not to trigger rejection. The product did not claim superiority through a message. It changed the cognitive conditions under which the first encounter occurred.

The observable shift was immediate and behavioral. Within the same commercial cycle, the company received unsolicited contact from high-value segments, including beverages and spirits, that had not been activated through prior commercial channels. One contact led to a sustained production relationship requiring expansion and adaptation of manufacturing capacity. The case is important because the asset remained the same. The technical value did not change. What changed was the receptor system's frame, and therefore the product's capacity to enter operative memory as a distinctive and retrievable option.

Analytically, the case is retained not as evidence that symbolic packaging alone caused adoption, but as evidence that a materially unchanged asset can be reclassified when its first encounter is moved from a low-precision procurement frame into a higher-salience discovery frame. The observed activation is consistent with the article's distinction between exposure and position: prior sample delivery reached the system; the redesigned encounter entered cross-functional memory.

8.3 Case Two: The Circular System—Perceptual Dominance Through Convergent Architecture

The second case concerns a family-owned veterinary laboratory operating from the industrial periphery of a major metropolitan area. The firm had documented experience in the animal health market, but it occupied a structurally marginal position. Its strategic brief described its current positioning as 'a serious company, with a track record, responsible.' That description was accurate but strategically weak. It was a set of attributes, not a retrieval category. No consequential decision-maker searches operative memory for 'serious and responsible' when choosing a sector reference, a technical partner or a strategic supplier.

The company was already present in the memory of veterinarians, distributors, institutional buyers and academic specialists, but under the wrong category: local, secondary and replaceable. That classification was self-reinforcing. Because the firm was read as secondary, it was treated as secondary; because it was treated as secondary, the system accumulated evidence that confirmed the secondary reading. The Prism Effect was one of Reduction. A family firm from the industrial periphery, competing against multinational laboratories with established international validation networks, entered the receptor system with an attenuated prior before any individual signal was evaluated.

The diagnostic question was therefore not how to communicate better. It was what structure of signals had installed the marginal classification, and what structure would be required for the system to generate a different one. Two problems emerged. First, the company lacked a coherent signal architecture: isolated initiatives did not accumulate into a single memory trace. Second, the origin prism reduced the assigned precision of the company's own emissions. The intervention had to redesign identity, validation and category membership at the same time.

The visual system was rebuilt and aligned with the codes of human-grade pharmaceutical laboratories, not to misrepresent the company but because its existing signals were triggering the wrong category before product evaluation began. What followed was the construction of a circular system: multiple independent entry points, each operating in a different register of the market's memory, all leading back to the same classification. The design principle was perceptual inevitability. Wherever the relevant market encountered the firm—university, professional event, technical conversation, sector forum, diplomatic introduction or training initiative—the encounter had to reinforce the same reading.

Seven strata were deposited across fifteen years. First, formal agreements with national universities made the company a node in the sector's academic production chain. Second, the company convened the globally recognized leading authority in its discipline's core science—a professor at a major North American research university and author of the standard textbook used in veterinary faculties worldwide—for a scientific event in its home market. Third, events on corporate social responsibility with a major national university positioned the company as a participant in professional value formation. Fourth, a recurring forum with economists, political analysts and sector leaders allowed the firm to frame the agricultural sector's macroeconomic conversation rather than merely participate in it.

The remaining strata extended the architecture beyond reputation into structural memory. Diplomatic and agricultural-federation introductions into a foreign university created an intervention on the origin prism itself, because the firm was being introduced by sources carrying higher assigned precision than it could have claimed alone. Education initiatives with a national professional society, an industry player, diplomatic representation, scientific bodies and regional universities reached future professionals before they became market decision-makers. Finally, a formal agreement with the principal agricultural faculty of the country's leading public university institutionalized a technical advisory and training center for the livestock sector.

The case demonstrates the layering mechanism more clearly than a single campaign could. No stratum was sufficient by itself. The cumulative effect came from convergence across different sources, contexts and moments in the decision-maker's professional life. Over time, the company ceased to be retrieved as a local secondary option and became stored as a structural institution of its sector. The outcome extended beyond domestic reclassification: by the conclusion of the period, the firm had active commercial presence across multiple countries in the region. The international validation architecture had preceded the company into those markets, restructuring the origin prism before the first commercial signal arrived.

Analytically, this case strengthens the layering claim because the outcome cannot

plausibly be attributed to one message, event or validator. Its explanatory value lies in convergence: repeated encounters across academic, professional, diplomatic and sectoral contexts changed the actor's category membership and reduced the attenuating effect of origin. The pattern is therefore consistent with the proposed relationship between validation architecture, assigned precision and operative-memory thickness.

8.4 Case Three: The Invisible Man—From Structural Illegibility to Institutional Belonging

The third case concerns a mid-level businessman operating in the healthcare sector. He had assets, professional relationships and continuity within his immediate environment, but he did not exist as a recognizable actor in systems of influence beyond it. He had no curriculum vitae, no professional profile in any public or institutional registry, and only one connection to the closed institutional system he sought to enter: he held a premium seat at its principal venue and attended its events as a paying member of the public.

His declared objective was significant: membership in the governing board of one of the most internationally recognized sporting institutions in the world. The target institution did not operate through open application alone. Recognition was produced through social and relational layers largely invisible to outsiders: accumulated co-presence in spaces where the institution's identity was reproduced, introduction by existing members, and gradual confirmation that a candidate belonged to the world the institution considered governable.

The diagnostic began with the receptor system, not the actor. How did the institution construct recognition of potential governance members? Which environments produced that recognition? Which signals carried high assigned precision? The answer was that formal credentials were necessary but insufficient. The system required accumulated social evidence: shared contexts with existing members, repeated presence in curated environments, and signals arriving from validators whose judgment the institution already trusted. A second diagnostic was equally important: the actor's real assets, his conversational and intellectual capacity, and the level of sustained investment he was willing to make. This assessment would later define the boundary of the outcome.

The first intervention was the construction of a verifiable identity. A foundation at the intersection of health, sport and education gave the actor an institutional identity independent of his business partnerships and legible to systems that would otherwise have no category for him. Access to high-precision environments was then engineered systematically: leadership forums, international networks and strategic conversations across geographies and sectors. A critical stratum was the actor's introduction into the governance structure of a philanthropic organization led by a figure of exceptional international standing, an heir to one of Europe's most recognized business dynasties. The signal this produced was decisive: not 'this person claims to belong,' but 'this person has already been recognized by someone whose judgment we trust.'

The architecture also required substantive formation. Academic specialization at a globally recognized institution in his professional domain created verifiable credentials. Leadership formation under a senior military officer of a global power introduced the actor to a register of strategic thinking recognized by elite systems. Co-authorship with academics at leading North American universities on sport, innovation and institutional

management produced retrievable evidence of intellectual standing in the field he sought to govern. These interventions were not cosmetic. They built the actor's capacity to sustain the position being installed.

The first observable shift occurred in the actor's immediate environment: business partners who had previously minimized his standing recalibrated their behavior. This mattered because positioning inside one system began to generate changed reflection back to the actor and changed signals outward from him, illustrating the bidirectional mirror described earlier. The target system then followed. Within the stated horizon, the actor achieved membership in the institution's governing board. Activation occurred when the system retrieved and accepted him as belonging to the category he had previously not occupied.

The case also demonstrates a boundary condition. The actor's original declared objective was the presidency of the institution. That objective was not achieved because the actor's sustained commitment fell below the threshold required for an objective of that scale. Board membership was achieved at the level of investment sustained. The presidency was foreclosed not by the system's architecture but by the actor's investment ceiling. This is not an anecdotal limitation; it directly supports the law of proportionality proposed in Section 5.

The broader principle is that strategic positioning can install an actor in a system's memory only to the extent that the actor can sustain the signals the new position requires. The architecture amplifies what the actor provides, but it cannot replace what the actor withholds or has not built within himself. A position installed in memory that cannot be sustained through behavior, conversation and judgment eventually produces contradictory strata and downward recalibration. Systems do not respond to potential. They respond to structured perception sustained over time.

Analytically, the third case is important because it shows both activation and ceiling. The same architecture that made board membership thinkable did not overcome the actor's insufficient sustained commitment for the presidency objective. This negative boundary is valuable: it prevents the framework from becoming a universal success narrative and supports the paper's claim that positioning depth is proportional to coherence, duration and assigned precision.

9. Implications and Research Agenda

This article has argued that strategic positioning is not a communication discipline. It is a systemic architecture for installing a stable interpretation of value in the operative memory of a decision system. The five-variable model upon its memory substrate provides an integrated taxonomy not yet available in the positioning literature with this degree of systemic articulation. Several implications follow.

Implication 1: Positioning Must Be Measured Differently

If position is a state of memory rather than a state of awareness, then the metrics currently used to evaluate positioning measure the wrong thing. Awareness, recall, sentiment, share of voice and impressions are measures of exposure. They indicate whether signals reached the system. They do not indicate whether those signals entered operative memory under the correct category, with sufficient precision, in a form retrievable

at the moment of decision.

A mature measurement framework must assess whether the actor is remembered, under which search category it is retrieved, with what priority and against which alternatives. Because positioning is not optional, it must also measure the classification that exists before deliberate intervention—the baseline position formed from uncontrolled signals, default inferences and accumulated impressions.

Implication 2: Sequence Matters as Much as Content

Prediction errors only produce model updating when they arrive from sources of sufficient assigned precision. The order of interventions is therefore structural. Legitimacy must precede ambitious interpretation change. Assigned precision must precede eligibility design. Memory installation must precede activation attempts. A process that inverts this sequence may fail even when its content is correct.

Implication 3: The Actor's Internal Coherence Is a Technical Variable

Client commitment, consistency and discipline are not merely managerial concerns. They are technical variables of the positioning system. Incoherent actors produce incoherent signals; incoherent signals degrade assigned precision; degraded precision limits the model-updating capacity of every subsequent intervention. The diagnostic phase must assess the actor's sustainable coherence as a structural parameter before objectives are set.

Implication 4: Entropy Management Is Domain-Specific

Entropy operates differently depending on the actor-system relationship. In positioning within a system, the architect reduces receptor entropy to enable correct classification. In adversarial contexts, inducing entropy in the opposing system creates permeability. The two contexts require distinct intervention architectures.

Implication 5: Perceptual Layering Reframes the Time Horizon

If position is produced by accumulated coherent strata rather than discrete campaigns, the appropriate unit of measurement is not a campaign cycle but a positioning horizon: the minimum time required for sufficient strata to accumulate in receptor memory to produce the target classification with sufficient robustness to sustain activation. Industry practice driven by annual budgets and quarterly reporting is structurally misaligned with this logic.

Implication 6: Method Must Precede Message

If the receptor system's interpretive architecture determines how signals are classified, strategic positioning cannot begin with messaging. It must begin with method: prism diagnosis, decision environment mapping, validation architecture, sequence design, feedback calibration and coherence assessment. The message is a late-stage artifact of the architecture, not its starting point.

Implication 7: Education Functions as Pre-Market Positioning

The second case demonstrates that education can install an actor in the operative memory of a decision system before that system activates as a buying or selection environment. When a future decision-maker enters a professional domain having been formed by content, events, vocabulary or relationships associated with a specific actor, that actor is already stored not as a supplier but as a reference institution. Designing educational interventions with architectural rigor is therefore not merely philanthropic or reputational. It is an intervention on the memory architecture of a professional generation before that generation becomes a market.

Research Agenda

The framework opens several lines of inquiry. The foundational line concerns the formal specification of the relationship between coherence of the signal architecture, duration of sustained emission and precision assigned by the receptor system. This article argues that the relationship is multiplicative rather than additive: a zero value on any one variable produces zero position regardless of the others. Coherence can be operationalized as the inverse of semantic and behavioral variance across emission channels; duration as the number of relevant perceptual processing cycles completed within the receptor's decision horizon; and assigned precision through response latency, inclusion in consideration sets, unsolicited retrieval and activation under pressure.

A second line concerns memory-based measurement instruments calibrated to category, precision and retrievability rather than awareness or sentiment. A third concerns empirical mapping of sequence effects in interventions that follow or invert the cybernetic sequence. A fourth concerns diagnostic instruments for actor coherence and sustainable investment ceilings. A fifth concerns cross-domain extension of the layering model across commercial markets, institutional environments, closed social systems and geopolitical contexts. A sixth concerns a formal entropic typology of receptor systems, classified by entropy levels, resistance profiles and permeability conditions.

Limitations and Boundary Conditions

Three limitations should be stated clearly. First, the cases are author-embedded and therefore vulnerable to interpretive proximity. Second, the cases are anonymized, which protects confidentiality but restricts independent verification. Third, the framework is conceptual and exploratory; it requires further empirical testing through independent case studies, longitudinal retrieval measures and controlled or quasi-controlled designs where possible. In particular, because the cases were drawn from successful engagements, they cannot by themselves separate the proposed mechanism from selection on the outcome; testing the framework against its disconfirmation conditions requires cases sampled independently of whether position was ultimately achieved.

The proposed framework is not universal in the sense of eliminating context. It is most applicable where receptor systems make repeated or consequential decisions under uncertainty, rely on memory-based categories, assign differential credibility to sources, and operate through interpretable feedback loops. Its explanatory power is weaker where decisions are random, mechanically price-driven, legally predetermined, or made under conditions in which actors cannot generate coherent signals over time.

The model also assumes that the actor possesses real value capable of surviving use, verification and retrieval. Where such value is absent, positioning may generate temporary exposure but will ultimately produce uncontrolled memory—not necessarily negative, but disconnected from the actor’s intended classification and therefore unpredictable in its effects on future retrieval and activation.

Alternative explanations are also possible in each case: market timing, actor capability, institutional opportunity, price conditions, personal networks and exogenous events may all have contributed to outcomes. The framework does not deny those factors. It specifies the mechanism through which such factors become readable, memorable and actionable within the receptor system. Future research should therefore test not whether positioning alone explains outcomes, but whether memory-category change mediates the relationship between signal architecture and activation behavior.

10. Conclusion

Strategic positioning, properly understood, is one of the most consequential disciplines in the contemporary landscape of institutional, commercial and geopolitical competition. Its consequences are real and measurable—in the decisions systems make, the actors they call, the value they recognize and the value they ignore.

Yet the field still lacks a sufficiently integrated theoretical foundation for explaining how value becomes legible, stored, retrieved and activated inside decision systems. This article is a proposal for that foundation. It is not a final answer. It is a precise question directed at the field, at researchers, at practitioners and at the decision systems themselves.

Decision systems do not act on what is real but on what they can read, and the task of strategic positioning is to make verified value legible with the coherence, patience and architectural discipline that durable position requires.

Positioning is memory design. The mirror metaphor captures the recursive mechanism: once the receptor system retrieves the actor differently, the actor receives a changed reflection that can alter future behavior, confidence and signal quality. In that loop, position becomes more than a message successfully delivered: it becomes a decision system that reliably remembers the actor under the correct category at the moment of decision.

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