

RISE ABOVE THE NOISE

How to Stand Out at the Marketing Interview

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Potential Marketing Interview Question Types

Competency	Question type
Advertising	Questions around critiquing advertising campaigns
Marketing strategy, customer insight and media strategies	Questions about creating marketing plans
Business and quantitative analysis	Pricing, business case and estimation questions
Project execution & interpersonal skills	Behavioral interview questions

Chapter 2 Creating a Positioning Statement

A popular marketing interview question is: “Create a positioning statement for our product.”

A positioning statement is usually a sentence that addresses the following:

- What is the product?
- Who is it for?
- Why should I buy it?
- Why is it better than competing alternatives?

Here’s an example:

Targeted to performance-seeking fathers, the Honda Odyssey is a minivan offering plenty of room and amenities for the family, while providing sporty handling and a powerful engine, unlike its competition.

Positioning statements are highly regarded and form the bases from which others in the marketing organization develop marketing materials that are in-line with that unique identity the organization wants to impart in a person’s mind.

What is the Interviewer Looking For?

When asking candidates to create a positioning statement, the interviewer is evaluating a candidate's ability to:

- Connect with the customer
- Identify the brand promise (or product benefit) and provide a clear reason to believe the brand promise
- Understand the competition

How to Approach the Question

Answer the question with this positioning statement template in mind.

Positioning Statement Template

For [target end user]

Who wants/needs [compelling reason to buy]

The [product name] is a [product category]

That provides [key benefit].

Unlike [main competitor],

The [product name] [key differentiation]

This widely accepted positioning template was developed by Geoffrey Moore, the author of *Crossing the Chasm*, a book about marketing high tech products. As with any template or framework, this is meant to be a guideline or checklist. Rigorously applying the template during the interview may sound too formal, boring, or academic.

For a more informal approach to positioning statements, consider a product slogan instead. We can see that many brand and product slogans can double as effective positioning statements:

Brand	Slogan	Implied Benefit
-------	--------	-----------------

Avis	We Try Harder	Customer service
BMW	Ultimate Driving Machine	Thrill & excitement
Miller Light	Great Taste...Less Filling	Low-calorie
Wheaties	Breakfast of Champions	Performance

If you have to develop a position statement for a product, I'd recommend a hybrid of a corporate slogan and the positioning template. You want a slogan's pizzazz and the template's comprehensiveness.

Evaluating Positioning Statements

When evaluating responses to a positioning question, here's what interviewers are looking for in a positioning statement:

- Is it unique and memorable?
- Is it different from that of the competition?
- Will consumers believe it and why will they believe it?
- Can the company use it to create marketing materials?

One and Only One Product Benefit

Don't be tempted to name multiple benefits in a positioning statement. There are several reasons why this isn't ideal.



Ogilvy for Volvo

First, every brand should strive to be the brand leader. Imagine a consumer who wants to buy a car highly rated for safety. There could be cars that are safer than Volvo, but it's a strong bet that a safety-minded consumer would at least consider a Volvo. And by being considered, Volvo, the brand leader, increases the likelihood that a consumer sold on the category benefits (in this case, a safe car) will buy a Volvo.

Second, once brand leadership is attained, it's easy to retain and defend. For over 100 years, Pepsi competed against Coca-Cola. And Pepsi marketers have research studies that prove their product consistently beats Coca-Cola in blind taste tests. Despite Pepsi's efforts to create better tasting products or amp up their marketing efforts, it's unlikely that Pepsi can convince consumers that they are the top cola brand anytime soon.

Can a Brand Claim Leadership in Two Different Categories?

History says no. Countless market leaders have attempted to straddle multiple product benefits, only to have a more focused challenger outcompete them on a single benefit. Here are some examples:

Unfocused market leader	Multiple product benefits	Focused challenger	Single product benefit
Emery Air Freight	Overnight, Two or Three day service, large packages and small packages	FedEx	Overnight
Chevrolet	Large, small, inexpensive, expensive	Mercedes-Benz	Prestige
Tic Tac	Freshen breath, taste, low-calorie, fun, color, sounds	Altoids	Freshen breath

Brands that lead in multiple categories are likely competing with inferior competitors. It's unlikely they would maintain that multiple category brand leadership over the long-term.

To recap, by focusing on a single product benefit, a brand is better positioned to win category leadership. And winning category leadership increases the effectiveness of a brand's marketing efforts and the likelihood of a sale.

Marketers claim multiple product benefits will unlikely gain category leadership and its attendant benefits. Consumers will lose track for what your brand stands for and in the process, forget when and why they should purchase your brand.

Practice Question

1. How would you position the Samsung Chromebook?

Answer

How would you position the Samsung Chromebook?



Screenshot / Samsung

CANDIDATE: I can't come up with a positioning statement on the spot. Most marketing professionals spend three months to perfect a position statement.

Interviewer gets annoyed with the candidate's attempt to deflect the question

INTERVIEWER: I get your concerns, but I want you to try.

CANDIDATE: Give me a second to collect my thoughts.

Candidate takes 45 seconds

CANDIDATE: Here's my positioning statement: "Targeted at current notebook users, the Samsung Chromebook is a device that competes with the iPad. It can be considered as a tablet with a keyboard at half the price of Apple's tablet. It provides a fast web searching and surfing experience."

INTERVIEWER: I'm not impressed. I have three problems with this:

First, the Chromebook does not compete with the iPad. A Chromebook is a laptop computer that competes with Macs and PCs. Google’s product that competes with the iPad is the Android tablet.

Second, I’m pretty sure that most notebook users don’t need a second laptop.

Lastly, you don’t offer convincing evidence why this product has a “fast web search and surfing experience.”

CANDIDATE: Let me give it another shot.

Candidate takes 30 seconds

CANDIDATE: Here’s my second attempt: “For users that want an easy-to-use machine at a low price, the Chromebook is the highest quality laptop around. It’s the best machine for the Google ecosystem.”

INTERVIEWER: This is better than your first attempt, but it’s still unsatisfying. I don’t know who your target audience is, and you don’t define the Google ecosystem. You use several superlatives including “easy-to-use,” “highest quality” and “best machine” without evidence.

CANDIDATE: Sorry.

Scorecard

Overall Rating: Poor

- Marketing aptitude: Poor
- Plan: Poor
- Communication skills: Below average
- Composure: Poor
- Satisfying conclusion: Poor

Critique

This is how a below average candidate responds to a positioning statement question. They are reluctant to answer, apply the positioning template incorrectly and respond poorly to interviewer criticism.

Albeit a bit blunt, the interviewer provides detailed insight on why the candidate's two attempts are lacking.

Here's what I would consider as a model response:

“For first time computer buyers, such as students and grandparents, the Samsung Chromebook is as sexy as the MacBook Air but costs 80 percent less.”

It clearly articulates the target audience and lays out the product benefit. It also identifies the competition and why it's different. Finally, the last phrase, “Samsung Chromebook is as sexy as the MacBook Air but costs 80 percent less,” has the zest that the interviewer can easily imagine as a smart product tagline.

Chapter 3 Developing Marketing Campaigns

When asked, “You have \$1 million dollars. Walk me through your marketing plan for this product” candidates typical freeze with fear. Less-experienced marketers are likely thinking, “I've never had a million dollar marketing budget. How do I know what to do?” Experienced marketers probably think, “I can tell you what to do with it. But I can't tell you now. I need three to six months and a team of people to brainstorm and iterate before executing on a marketing plan.”

It's a question that both new and experienced marketers find unreasonable, but there are reasons why interviewers ask it.

market interview, and the candidate handled it with aplomb. This is a top 1% response.

Chapter 5 Declining Sales

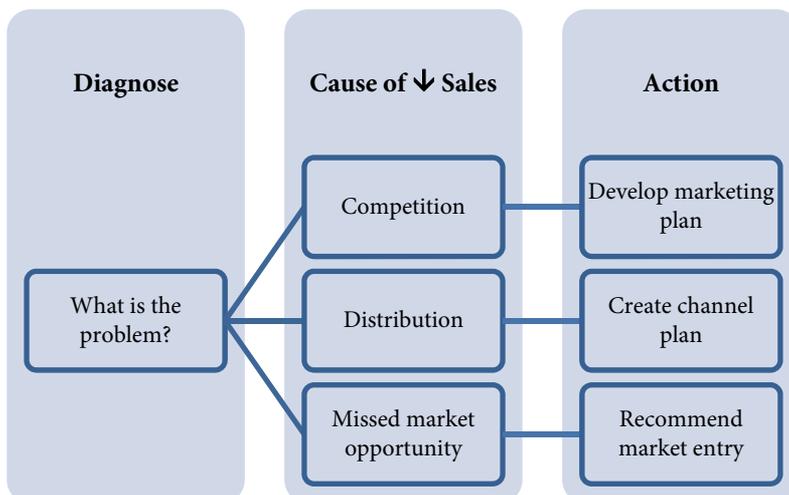
Declining sales is a common marketing interview question, especially at brand management companies. Some examples:

- Why did Kit Kat sales decline year-over-year?
- Colgate toothpaste sales are flat, but market share declined. What happened?

What is the Interviewer Looking For?

- *Problem solving skills.* Do you have a logical and efficient way of approaching the problem?
- *Business judgment.* How keen is your business judgment? How quickly can you find the issue and propose relevant solutions?
- *Creativity.* Do you have unique and memorable ideas that are relevant to improving the business goal?

How to Approach the Question



I'd recommend approaching questions about declining sales in two parts:

1. What is the problem?
2. What's your recommended solution to the problem?

For your diagnosis, remember:

Sales = Price * Quantity

Ask questions that reveal how price and sales quantity have been affected.

Here are potential questions to ask:

- Has customer demand been affected lately?
 - Changing consumer preferences?
 - Reformulate an existing product?
- Did the competition make any changes?
 - Launch a new product?
 - Lower prices?
 - Increase advertising?
- Have our channels been affected?
 - Lose shelf space?
 - Reduce channel promotions?
- What other changes have occurred?

After a couple questions, the cause of the declining sales will be clear. It may be a competitive issue, a distribution problem or a missed market opportunity.

From there, you'll have to recommend a course of action. Depending on the problem, you can use an appropriate framework. For instance, if the problem is with competition, the Big Picture marketing framework is appropriate.

Practice Questions

As Brand Manager for Kingsford Charcoal, how do you increase sales in a shrinking market?

1. Kit Kat sales declined year-over-year. Why is that, and what would you do to address it?
2. Colgate toothpaste sales are flat, but market share has gone down. What happened and how would you improve it?

Answers

As Brand Manager for Kingsford Charcoal, how do you increase sales in a shrinking market?

INTERVIEWER: You are the Brand Manager for Kingsford Charcoal. Gas grill usage is substantially increasing, leading charcoal to decline. What should you do?

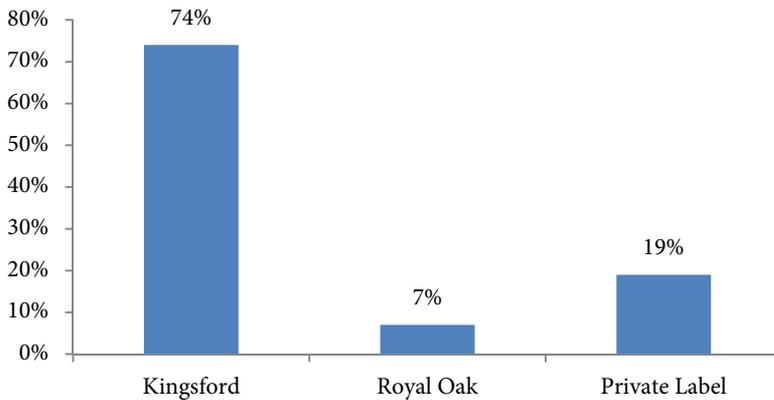
CANDIDATE: Before I jump in, can I ask for some background information? I don't know much about the charcoal market.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

CANDIDATE: Who are Kingsford's major competitors, and what is their market share?

INTERVIEWER: Kingsford's top competitors are Royal Oak charcoal followed by several private label brands. Here are the latest market share figures:

Charcoal Market Share in the Last 12 Months



Rise Above the Noise

CANDIDATE: It looks like Kingsford is the dominant charcoal player today. Has that always been the case?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, Kingsford's market share has been roughly in the 75% range for the last 20 years.

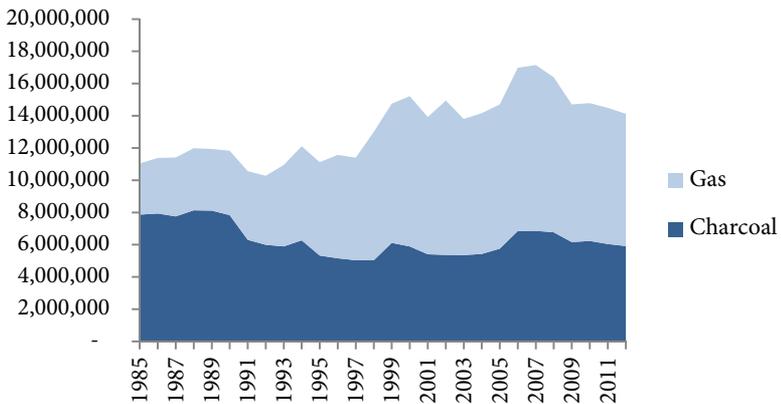
CANDIDATE: Is it fair to say Kingsford has weathered the private label onslaught well?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Even though Kingsford is priced at a premium, consumers are willing to pay a \$3 to \$4 premium for a known brand.

CANDIDATE: How about consumer trends? When I go to BBQ parties, I see more gas than charcoal grills.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, gas grills have become more popular over the years. Here's some recent data on gas vs. charcoal trends. Electric grills are also a significant player in the market, but let's set them aside for the purpose of simplicity.

Grill Shipments in North America



CANDIDATE: It appears consumer preferences have changed over time.

What explains the growth of gas grills over charcoal ones?

INTERVIEWER: What do you think?

CANDIDATE: A couple of reasons pop in mind:

- *Speed.* Gas grills can heat up within 10 to 15 minutes, whereas a charcoal fire could take 30 minutes to heat up.
- *Messy.* Charcoal is dirty, and lighter fluid, if tipped over, can create a mess.
- *Ease of use.* Charcoal grills can be hard to light.
- *Safety.* Charcoal grills are more likely to pose a threat to nearby buildings.
- *Heating control and consistency.* It's easier to get a gas grill to heat up to a particular temperature, especially with knob controls.

INTERVIEWER: Sounds like you've covered most of the reasons.

CANDIDATE: Do charcoal grills have advantages over gas grills?

INTERVIEWER: Based on some recent barbecue association data, here are reasons why consumers like charcoal grills:

- 77 percent like the taste of charcoal grills
- 46 percent like cooking outdoors
- 35 percent like entertaining
- 32 percent think it's inexpensive
- 30 percent think it's easier and more convenient

We also found that during tailgate parties, charcoal grills are used 76 percent of the time. Gas grills are used only 24 percent of the time.

Charcoal grills produce a different (and some claim, better) smoke than gas grills. Using smoke vs. flame heat is a trend that's gaining in popularity.

CANDIDATE: What has Kingsford done so far to promote the perceived flavor advantages of charcoal over gas grilling?



Screenshot @Kingsford

INTERVIEWER: We have several SKUs that promote unique flavors. This is packaging for our Mesquite SKU. We also have a Hickory SKU.

CANDIDATE: Thanks for answering my questions and providing helpful background context. Is there anything else I should know before I summarize my recommendation to you?

INTERVIEWER: No, I can't think of anything.

CANDIDATE: Give me a few moments to prepare my recommendation

Candidate takes 60 seconds

CANDIDATE: To summarize, Kingsford is dominating the charcoal category and resisting the onslaught of private label manufacturers. The bigger problem is that the overall category is shrinking, as consumers opt for the speed, convenience and safety of gas grills.

However, charcoal grills do have a strong perceived advantage over gas grills: better taste. To increase sales of Kingsford charcoal, I would recommend that the brand promotes the food flavor benefit to food aficionados, also known as foodies. The latest stats show that 54 percent of all American consumers identify as foodies. A potential positioning statement could be:

For foodies who want the best-tasting grilled food, Kingsford is grilling charcoal. Unlike gas grills, Kingsford charcoal contains natural elements such as pine, spruce and charred softwoods that provide a natural, unique flavor that will have you and your guests salivating for more.

In terms of the marketing plan, there are a couple of things I would recommend:

- *Distribution.* I would recommend selling Kingsford charcoal in high-end grocery stores known to foodies. Whole Foods and Trader Joe's come to mind. I would recommend in-store advertising and promotions that utilize the Kingsford positioning statement including:

- *In-store signage*
 - *Stickers on meat, fish and vegetable products*
 - *Cooking demonstrations that utilize and prominently feature Kingsford products*
 - *Product.* I would suggest launching new Kingsford SKUs that promote the consumer's belief that Kingsford charcoal produce better tasting food. One approach could be: manufacture charcoal infused with special flavors such as orange peel, lemon zest, sweet onion or hot peppers. Or create flavors that compliment certain types of meats such as steak, pork or fish. And perhaps even invent charcoal flavors that are reminiscent of different cuisines such as Cajun or Korean charcoal.
 - *Price.* With the new product SKUs that promote flavor, I believe we can raise the price of Kingsford charcoal from \$8 to \$10 a bag to perhaps \$15 a bag. Consumers will be willing to pay more to have more exotic flavors.
 - *Promotions.* To support a line extension, I would encourage an above-the-line campaign to target foodies and the flavor message. For TV ads, I would recommend advertising on the Food Network. For online ads, I would suggest Google AdWords along with placements on AllRecipes.com and Epicurious.com. For print ads, I would recommend advertising in *Bon Appétit* and *Food & Wine* magazine.
-

Scorecard

- Overall Rating: Excellent
- Marketing Aptitude: Excellent
- Plan: Excellent
- Communication Skills: Excellent
- Composure: Excellent
- Satisfying Conclusion: Excellent

Critique

Candidate asked relevant questions and quickly sized up the situation. The assessment of broader category and consumer trends was dead on, and the positioning statement was well done. The promotional and pricing tactics were reasonable.

The candidate recognized that this was a marketing problem and appropriately utilized the Big Picture framework in a declining sales question.

The recommendation for the line extension shouldn't be taken lightly. I would have preferred stronger reasoning and analysis before jumping into the specifics of the plan. However, the promotional and pricing tactics make sense, if they truly are trying to push a line extension.

This question feels like a new market entry question, but it's not. The decision to enter the U.S. market has already been made. Your job as the candidate is to determine the go-to-market strategy. In other words, apply the Big Picture framework for developing marketing campaigns.

Chapter 7 Defending Against Competition

There will be a time for every brand when a competitor will challenge with a better product, aggressive advertising or identify new, untapped customers. There are countless brands that have lost sales to a more determined competitor. Defending against the competition is a natural part of any business; that's why this is a common interview question.

What Is the Interviewer Looking For?

For this interview question, the interviewer is evaluating the following:

- Does the candidate understand the company?
- Can the candidate diagnose how and why the competition is a threat to sales?
- Can the candidate come up with a creative plan that effectively counteracts the competitive threat?

How to Approach the Problem

The first step is to assess the situation by asking questions:

- What is the competitive threat?
- Which customers are being targeted?
- How is the consumer responding to the competitor's moves?
- How is our brand affected by the situation?
- What is available in our arsenal to fight the threat?

The second step is to determine the goal of the competitive response. It could be general such as maintain or increase market share, or it could be specific, such as decrease call center cancellations from 80 percent to 60 percent.

The third step is to develop the plan. I would recommend using the Big Picture Framework. It'll make sure you hit all the elements of a thoughtful competitive marketing plan: which customer to target, how do we want to position the products and propose marketing tactics to address the competitive threat.

As a tip, here are some tactical responses that you can consider:

- Develop a loyalty program
- Improve product claims
- Reformulate the product
- Launch new line extensions
- Increasing advertising efforts

One of your key decisions is whether you'd respond to the competition directly. That depends on your market share. If the competitor is the market leader, you may want to call them out by name. That association helps smaller brands generate awareness, helping more consumers understand that you belong to a certain category.

However, if you are the market leader, you want to avoid calling out the competition. Here, the inverse will happen. You will inadvertently draw more attention to the competition, creating brand awareness among your customers around an unfamiliar brand.

Practice Questions

1. As the brand manager for OxiClean Stain Fighter, how would you respond to Tide's new stain fighter product, Tide Boost?

Answers

As the brand manager for OxiClean Stain Fighter, how would you respond to Tide’s new stain fighter product, Tide Boost?

CANDIDATE: I know OxiClean is your line of household detergents. However, I personally do not use the stain fighter category. Can you tell me more about it?

INTERVIEWER: The stain fighter category is an additive that helps remove laundry stains. It’s applied in addition to your laundry detergent. It’s also known as an in-wash booster.

CANDIDATE: Can you tell me more about the customers in the category?

INTERVIEWER: Moms, who deal with everything from grass stains to art-related accidents, are our most numerous customers. We recently ran a survey, and here’s what category customers report as reasons why they chose a particular stain fighter brand:

- Gets stains out (85%)
- Makes clothes brighter (65%)
- Value (54%)
- Convenient and no mess (24%)
- Environmentally friendly (13%)

CANDIDATE: Can you tell me more about Tide Boost, and how it differs from OxiClean Stain Fighter?

INTERVIEWER: Tide Boost’s motto is “Stains Out. No Doubt.” OxiClean’s current value proposition is “Cleaner, Whiter, Brighter.”

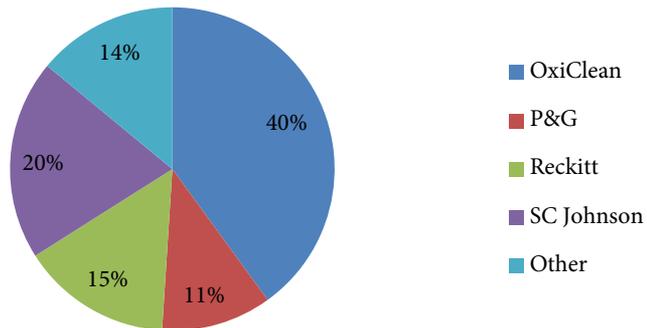
Here’s some data on how Boost’s product SKUs match up with Stain Fighter’s:

	Powder	Liquid	Spray	Gel	Pack
Stain Fighter	✓	✓	✓		
Boost	✓			✓	✓

CANDIDATE: What's OxiClean's market share relative to the competition?

INTERVIEWER: Here's the latest data from Nielsen's scanning database:

Stain Fighters Market Share in Last 12 Months



Rise Above the Noise

CANDIDATE: Do consumers like the gel and pack formats?

INTERVIEWER: Consumers find gel and pack to be less messy than powder and liquid formats.

CANDIDATE: What are the differences in price?

INTERVIEWER: We don't have detailed pricing information. But let's say that Tide is a premium brand while OxiClean is positioned as a value brand. Premium brands typically cost 50 percent more than value brands.

CANDIDATE: How are value brands perceived by consumers?

INTERVIEWER: I don't have consumer perception data, but you might infer consumer popularity based on segment growth rates. We classify consumers into four price segments: extreme value, value, mid and premium.

Segment	5 Year Growth
Extreme Value	11.7%
Value	1.5%
Mid	-10.1%
Premium	-17.4%

CANDIDATE: It looks like the more value-conscious segments are growing fastest. How are our advertising efforts?

INTERVIEWER: We're currently spending \$20 million on above-the-line advertising. We're expecting Tide to spend \$50 million to support the new brand.

CANDIDATE: How about distribution?

INTERVIEWER: Let's leave distribution out of the discussion. Assume that Stain Fighter and Boost's distribution capabilities are similar.

CANDIDATE: I think I have enough background data to craft my recommendation. Just to confirm our goal, I imagine the objective is to preserve market share?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, we want to maintain our 40 percent market share.

CANDIDATE: Do I have any budget limits?

INTERVIEWER: No, the sky is the limit.

CANDIDATE: Give me a moment to collect my thoughts and issue my final recommendation.

Candidate takes 45 seconds

CANDIDATE: To recap, OxiClean is a stain fighter that's needs to respond to a new product in the category, Tide Boost. OxiClean is the market leader with 40% market share, and the goal of our marketing efforts is to maintain and maybe increase market share. Given our market share lead, I would focus our marketing efforts on retaining our existing customers. Here are the top tactics I'd recommend to do so:

- *Stick with the "value" target segment.* The "value" and "extreme value" segments continue to grow. This is consistent with broader consumer trends of tighter budgets and being value conscious.
- *Modify product positioning.* The "cleaner, whiter" positioning is compelling, but doesn't hit directly at the category benefit: removing stains. I'd recommend product claims that revolve around "getting tough stains out," "breaking down stains," and "seek out stains."
- *Reformulate product.* Offer a new formula to give consumers a reason to believe the new product claims.
- *Fill gaps in the product portfolio.* Offer the gel and pack formats that are missing in OxiClean's lineup. Don't give current customers a chance to migrate to a competitor because the product format is not correct.
- *Co-branding opportunities.* Co-brand sibling products such as Arm & Hammer detergent and carpet odor eliminator with OxiClean. It'll help drive more awareness to OxiClean and reinforce OxiClean's brand with stain fighting.
- *Increase advertising.* Boost above-the-line advertising spend to match Tide's \$50 million spend to maintain top-of-mind awareness, positioning and perceived leadership in the category.

Scorecard

- Overall Rating: Excellent
- Marketing Aptitude: Excellent

- Plan: Excellent
- Communication Skills: Excellent
- Composure: Excellent
- Satisfying Conclusion: Excellent

Critique

The candidate led an in-depth discussion around the impending competitive threat, and he offered a detailed and logical plan to protect market share.

Some readers may be surprised how detailed and informed his recommendation is. Realize that the response's depth was only possible by taking the time upfront by asking good questions about the category, customer and competition.

Chapter 8 Dealing with Private Label Competition

For many consumer packaged goods companies, private label competition is one of their biggest threats to their business. From 2000 to 2010, private-label products gained nearly all of the growth in packaged food, beauty, personal care and home care categories. Private label goods have stolen share in almost all categories, and the volume has been staggering. For example, Kroger's private-label products account for 35 percent of the chain's total grocery units sold and 27 percent of its total revenue.

Private label is growing for the following reasons:

- *Consumer trends.* Consumers are getting more comfortable purchasing private-label goods. For instance, Bain & Company reports that in 2008, more than 90 percent have tried private labeled goods; that is an astonishing increase given that only 56 percent have tried private labels in 2004. Consumers increasingly view private label