

MARKETING WARS – MILITARY ANALOGIES IN THE MARKETING AND MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

Papp-Váry Árpád PhD habil.
BKF University of Applied Sciences, Budapest

Abstract: War metaphors have been used for a long time in the world of marketing, and, in a broader sense, that of management. The most popular sources are probably the wisdoms of Chinese General Sun Tzu, the advices of German General Clausewitz, and, of course, the guerrilla ideas of Che Guevara.

Keywords: marketing, metaphor, analogy, war, military

Introduction

„The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected.” – says Sun Tzu in the first paragraph of his book *Art of War*. [1]

Warfare has remained a popular topic of study ever since – although the book was born 2500 years ago, it has remained a favourite of athletes, businessmen, strategic consultants, and marketing professionals. It has been recently ranked on Usa Today's Best-Selling Books list again because Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* series told his psychiatrist that Sun Tzu's book is his favourite, resulting in an immediate demand of several thousand copies.

The Art of War

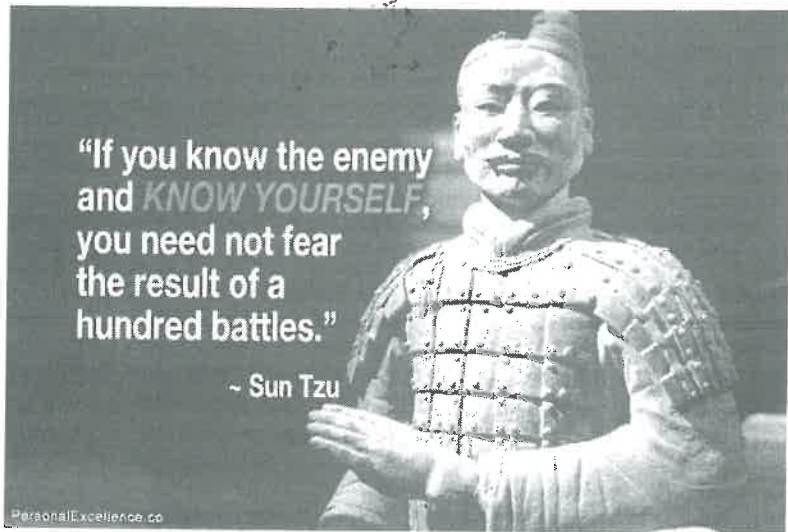
But let us see what advice the Chinese strategist gives us as his guidance has remained popular throughout ages. Several authors say that Sun Tzu created the foundations of positioning by saying that „The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat, and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy.” Others cite him to justify the importance of market research: „We are not fit to lead an army on the march unless we are familiar with the face of the country – its mountains and forests, its pitfalls and precipices, its marshes and swamps.” or highlight the section where he discusses the importance of spies. Some people even attribute the principle „think globally, act locally” to him, because he wrote that „We shall be unable to turn natural advantage to account unless we make use of local guides.”

They say that *The Art of War* also lays down the foundations of the SWOT analysis, especially, those of strenghts and weaknesses: „Hence in the wise leader's plans, considerations of advantage and of disadvantage will be blended together. If our expectation of advantage be tempered in this way, we may succeed in accomplishing the essential part of our schemes. If, on the other hand, in the midst of difficulties we are always ready to seize an advantage, we may extricate ourselves from misfortune.”

It is also important to highlight Sun Tzu's claim that it is equally important to examine ourselves and know the enemy: „If you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles...”

However, the greatest deficiency of most contemporary marketing strategies is that they still do not have a chapter about competitors and their expected actions. It is as if the company was able to move in some kind of a vacuum, but this is hardly true.

Last, but not least, it is also an important point that strategies must be clear and serve as a guidance, but at the same time they should be difficult to recognize from the outside and hard to copy: "All men can see these tactics whereby I conquer, but what none can see is the strategy out of which victory is evolved." [1]



War for everyone

Sun Tzu's book is one of the basic reference books used in today's military science schools. Even more exciting, however, is the number of its interpretations for different fields by various authors. Therefore Sun Tzu's wise advice may benefit women (*The Art of War for Women*, and *Sun Tzu for Women*), sportsmen (*The Way of the Champion: Lessons from Sun Tzu*), poker players (*How the Classic Strategies of Sun Tzu Can Transform Your Game*), project managers (*Sun Tzu and the Project Battleground*), company managers (*Sun Tzu's The Art of War for Executives*), and sales professionals (*The Art of War plus the Art of Sales*) [2-8].

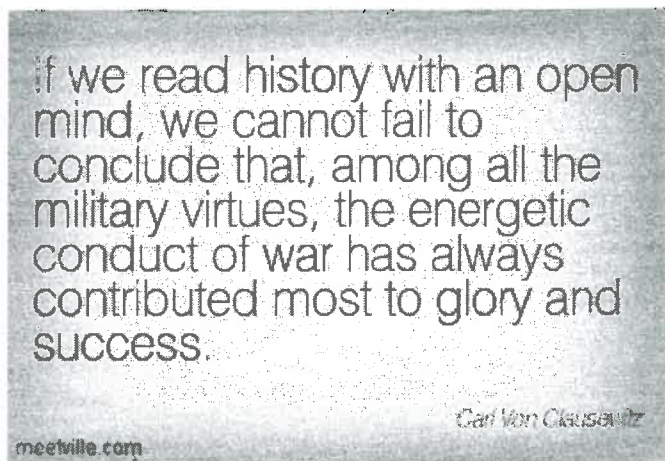
The most references to the original book of the Chinese strategist can be attributed to Gerald A. Michaelson and Steven W. Michaelson, who wrote a series of books about the possible adaptations of Sun Tzu's ideas. Their five volumes cover business in general, customer relationship management, company management, planning, setting objectives, and, of course, marketing. Each chapter begins with a Sun Tzu quote and a modern age interpretation is explained. Their book *Sun Tzu Strategies for Marketing – 12 Essential Principles for Winning the War for Customers*, for example, defines marketing strategy, market research, management principles and the importance of simplification with the help

Sun Tzu's ideas. At the end of the book we can find quotations by famous managers and marketing experts about the inspiration they got from *The Art of War*. [9]

The *Art of War* has also been the title of another book, published two thousand years later. The book by Niccolo Machiavelli is about Italy in the 1500s, and, especially, Florence. [10] It is almost as popular among managers and marketers as *The Prince*, another work by Machiavelli. Its most quoted phrase is „the end justifies the means”, although the sentence does not appear in the original book in that form. [11]

Lessons learned from battles

The best book on marketing was not written by a Harvard professor, or an old hand from General Motors, General Electric, or Procter & Gamble. According to Al Ries and Jack Trout, the fathers of the concept of positioning, the best book on marketing is *On War* by retired Prussian General Karl von Clausewitz, published in 1832. [12] What is more, they were so much impressed by the work of Clausewitz that they based their book *Marketing Warfare* on it. [13]



The analogy with warfare was not novel in itself as several marketing terms had been borrowed from the science of war before. The problem is that „although we speak and act like a general, we are far from thinking and planning like one”.

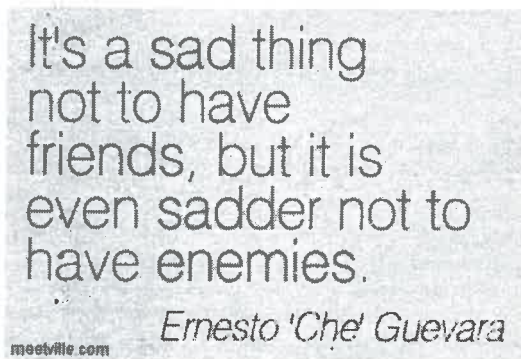
Therefore they analyse war experiences beginning in the Battle of Marathon that took place in 490 BC, through the Battle of Waterloo fought in 1815, to the Battle of Sedan fought in 1940. Then they adapt it for the world of marketing through examples such as the cola wars, the beer war, the hamburger war, or the computer war.

Their „strategic square” system is also based on the warfare analogy, and serves as a material for marketing courses. According to this, a company may choose between four strategies for marketing warfare (based on its market share): defensive, offensive, flanking and guerrilla.

Guerrilla Guevara

Having mentioned guerrilla, one of the most popular figures is Che Guevara, who has become a part of mainstream culture, and also appears on T-shirts. Let us face it: the assessment of his character and actions is rather contradictory, but it is a fact that his writings and ideas have had a great impact even in marketing.

As Che Guevara says in *Guerrilla Warfare* [14], „surprise (...) is obviously an essential element of guerrilla warfare”, and this is also the point, the essence of guerrilla marketing and guerrilla advertising. Something that is not radically different remains unnoticed in today's world. Guevara also claims that „It is never wise to habituate the enemy to a certain form of warfare; it is necessary to vary constantly the places, the hours, and the forms of operation”. This is also justified by the fact that the essence of advertising is continuous renewal. What is new today is outdated tomorrow. What is enough in this moment to capture people's attention is not enough in the next one. Newer and newer, better and better, feasible ideas are needed, and it is always good to invoke the great strategic thinkers of past times for inspiration.



War analogies for presentations

Here are a couple of quotations that can be used in marketing strategy materials or presentations to impress clients.

To emphasize the role of positioning: „Whoever is first in the field and awaits the coming of the enemy, will be fresh for the fight; whoever is second in the field and has to hasten to battle will arrive exhausted.” (Sun Tzu)

To emphasize the importance of market research: „A fundamental requirement of victory is prior knowledge which necessitates the use of secret agents.” (Sun Tzu)

To prepare planning: „prudence is not in avoiding danger (it's impossible), but calculating risk and acting decisively” (Niccolo Machiavelli)

To explain strategic position: „In war the defensive is easier than the offensive.” (Karl von Clausewitz)

To highlight a great idea: „No one wanting to get across a wide ditch would begin by jumping half-way.” (Karl von Clausewitz)

To affect consumers: „There are two levers for moving men – interest and fear.” (Napoléon Bonaparte)

To present innovations: „The revolution is not an apple that just falls when it is ripe. You have to make it fall.” (Che Guevara)

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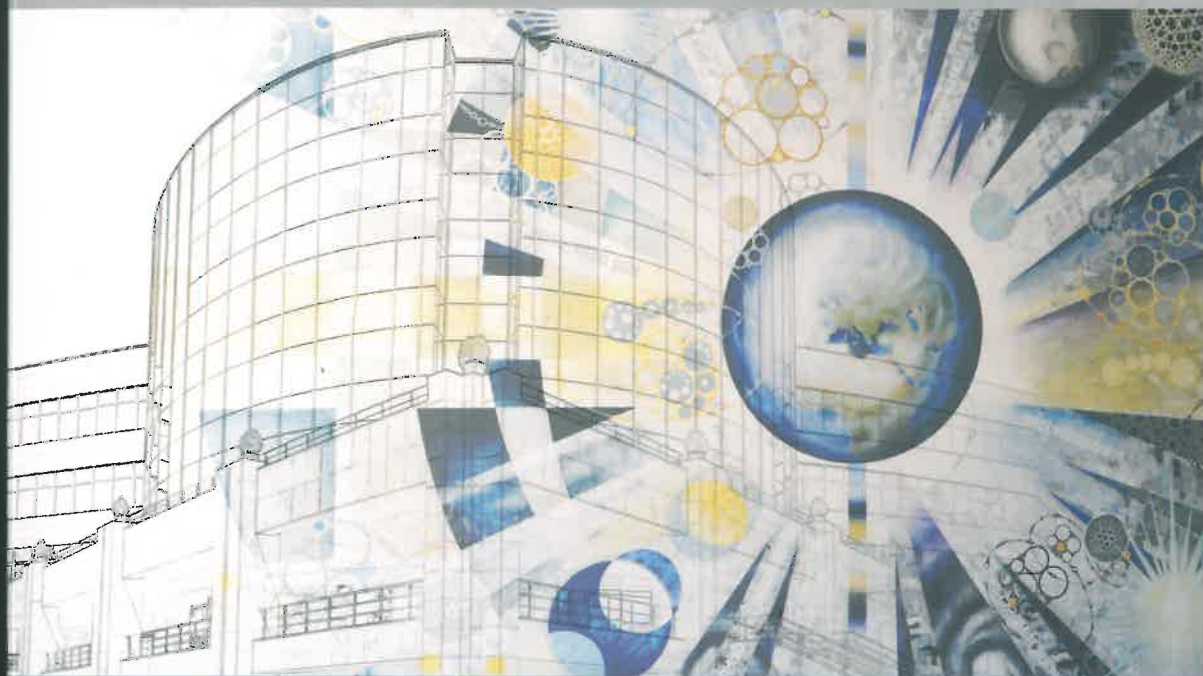
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ISBN 978-619-7126-10-5