



Brands. Outthink, Don't Outspend.

For all the talk of strategy and references to Sun Tzu, modern marketing feels woefully lacking in genuine strategic thinking. It's time for brands to engage 'mind over money' in order to outmanoeuvre the competition.

"Go smart
or die trying."

SUN TZU.

 NOKAMO

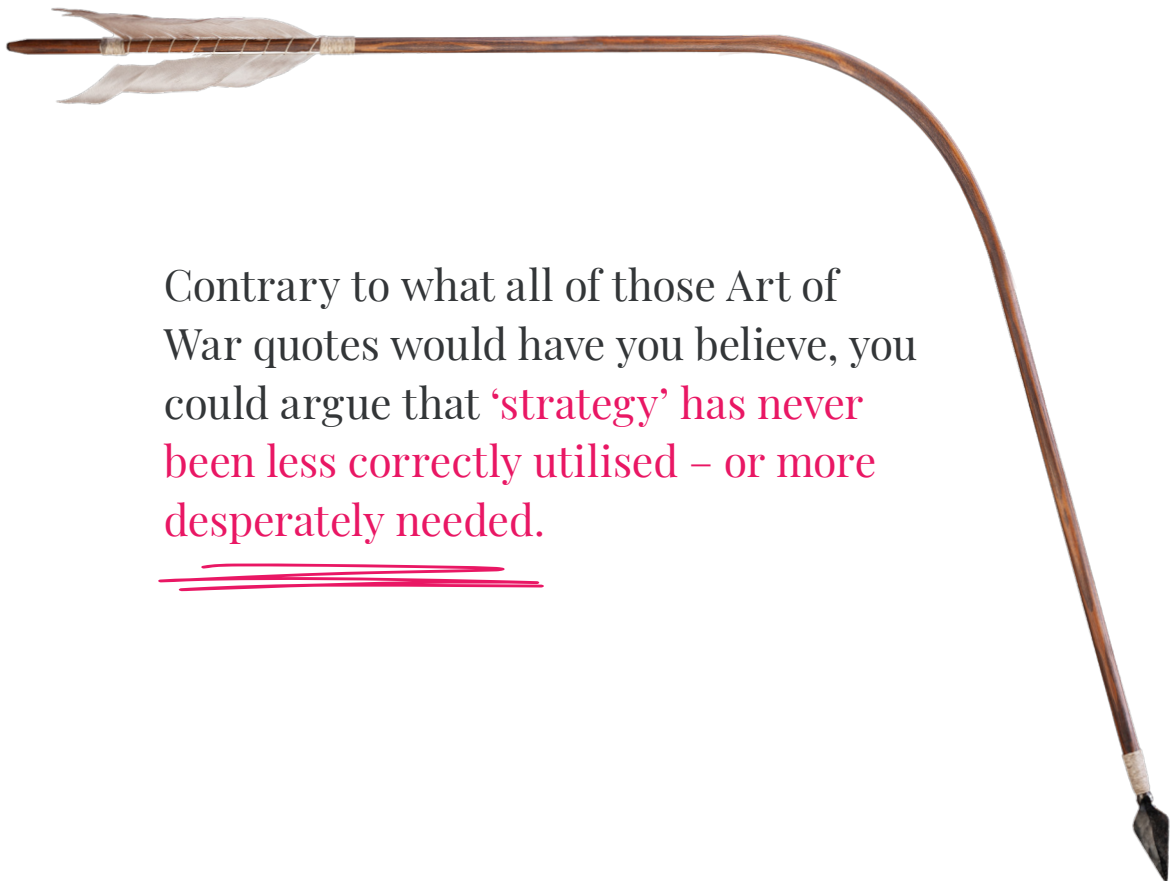


Pictures of Sun Tzu in brand strategy decks are like rats in London – you're only ever seven feet away from one, and when you do see one, there's almost certainly a whole load of dangerous shit lurking where that came from.

If you're familiar with Sun Tzu's works (I'm not pretending to have read him, but I've read plenty of people who have pretended to have read him), you'll know a lot of what he says can be summed up by the lesser-quoted Chinese master of combat, Bruce Lee, who, in Enter the Dragon, says that the best way to win a battle is to practise the art of "fighting without fighting".

Minimal confrontation. Fewest casualties. Lowest cost.

Why, then, does most modern marketing feel more like a war of attrition? In any industry, in any market, businesses are following a depressing pattern of activity. Going head-to-head like rutting stags in a doe shortage. Competing for the same customers, with their undifferentiated offerings, spending copious amounts of comms budgets to sustain volumes, all the while eroding profit margins and equity.



Contrary to what all of those Art of War quotes would have you believe, you could argue that **'strategy' has never been less correctly utilised – or more desperately needed.**



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We need only look at the world of Shopper Marketing in FMCG to see how a war of attrition plays out every day. Different brands take it in turns to take up their prime positions on their category's gondola end, a push-me-pull-you of costly promotional executions which result in no net change in market share for those involved, and where the only true winner is the retailer's media agency.

And what about those mid-sized businesses that can't bankroll the Ehrenberg Bass edict of 'target everyone, everywhere, all of the time'. If I had a hair for every time I heard "we just don't have the budget, so how are we meant to compete on spend?", I'd have far fewer hats. Anyway, the answer is, you don't.

Going up against the big boys in their respective categories is like the editor of a student rag mag going up against Logan Roy. To quote Sun Tzu, who, to be clear, I haven't read, "it's like bringing a dildo to a gunfight".

Instead, we can seek counsel in the words of military mastermind Mr Winston Churchill, when he said: "we are out of money, so now we have to think".

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There's just one small problem. Thinking is hard. The brain evolved to not think too deeply about anything. Thinking depletes the brain's ability to think - literally. There's only so much thinking in it before it needs to take a lie down in a darkened room with a hand draped melodramatically over its pre-frontal cortex.

The Palaeolithic brains - with which we are saddled - didn't need to work out the relative merits and demerits of Uhgg's stone cup versus Akak's. They were happy enough to no longer be eating their cornflakes off the floor. That's why you won't see a Venn Diagram or any of Porter's Five Forces carved into cave walls.

But think we must. **In the battle for business, brand is the force multiplier;** it is at the heart of all the 'thinking' that can put things on an unequal footing and undermine competitors before a single penny in marcomms is spent.

Building a brand means standing for something in a customer's mind. Not just (jabs finger like Neanderthal) "wooden club: good for foreplay", but something beyond the clichés and category expectations. A big, hairy, entirely ownable idea, around which both image and meaning can be constructed, and equity can start to be built.

Accrue equity and you accrue strategic advantages. In the simplest terms that includes being able to charge a premium, drive greater loyalty, maintain price elasticity, improve distribution, and have the capacity to branch out into other lucrative sectors and categories. Remember when Nokia used to sell wellies?

Accruing those advantages improves overall business performance. Do that and you have greater brand value on the balance sheet. It's a win:win:win situation.

But to properly weaponise brand, you need a proper brand strategy, not just a series of tactical skirmishes where people charge around, guns ablazing, whilst the business moat is crossed and the ramparts breached.

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So how do you approach brand strategy with military precision, even when budgets are a limiting factor? Let's take a quick tiptoe through the minefield together....

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Get the Lay of the Land

Many marketers would rather get their ears removed than hear how customers view their brand, often because they realise how true the aphorism 'you probably wouldn't worry about what people think of you, if you could know how seldom they actually do' is.

But research is not the enemy of progress, it is its ally. The whole purpose of marketing is to satisfy needs profitably. By understanding your customers, you can understand how best to serve them to grow your business.

Reconnaissance of competitors is also needed. Not so you can copy-and-paste yourself into benchmarked oblivion, but so you can understand their weaknesses in order to exploit them to your own advantage.

Pick Your Battles

Trying to do sophisticated mass marketing on a limited budget is like trying to artificially inseminate a cow with a water pistol. The mechanics are all wrong.

It's okay to target; to carefully examine the different segments revealed during research and pick just one or two - those that are worth more / are easier to reach / are more likely to buy - to pop into your crosshairs.

Lots of big brands started small. Nike targeted serious athletes before it became the globe's biggest athleisure brand. AirBed&Breakfast (as it was originally) started by targeting attendees at sold-out conferences.

THIS SHOE IS NOT FOR EVERYBODY



NIKE ROADRUNNER

(IT'S ONLY FOR THOSE WHO WANT THE BEST)



Choose Your Position

Our caveman brains are more adept at jumping to conclusions than a jealous husband finding the window-cleaner in the closet; they don't like to expend energy on rationally weighing up features and benefits. Which means you need to be abundantly clear on what you want to be to the tiny bit of cranial real estate that will be given to thinking about your business.

Positioning essentially involves choosing no more than two or three associations around which to shape the desired perception of your brand, relative to your competitors.

By making it easy for our over-stimulated grey matter to understand what you're about, you improve the chances of any 'echo' left over by thoughts of you being suitably meaningful and differentiated enough to tip the balance of purchase in your favour.

Find a Singular Attacking Proposition

Outmanoeuvring the competition means being absolutely clear not just on what you want to stand for, but how you're going to take that fight to market.

This is where your 'proposition' comes in – a distillation of your essence that purifies and strengthens what you have to offer in the eyes of the target customer, rendering its effect more potent than a Molotov cocktail.

These are not the 'some things' (invariably the features and benefits) that everyone else is talking about, but the 'one thing' that sums up who you are, why it matters, and that forms the foundations of the creative platform on which you can excite them about it.

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Ditch the Camouflage

When it comes to customer-facing propositions, blending into your surroundings is the one rule of warfare that needs to be broken.

The basic mathematics of marketing dictate that share of voice predicts future growth. Have a greater share of voice than your competitors, you grow. Less than, you shrink. But if you can't spend more, it stands to reason you have to shout louder.

Being meaningfully differentiated is how you create inequality and destabilise the natural order of things. By taking a stand against the status quo you ensure that, on those occasions that you can afford to promote your wares, you're as conspicuous as a clown in a combat zone.

Then, of course, you're into the whole objectives / tactics side of things, looking at the campaigns that will help deliver your version of victory. But it is brand strategy that is the pre-emptive strike that makes everything that comes after more likely to succeed. The strongest counterattack to your competitors, even if they have more manpower and firepower.

Cunning versus capital.

Mind over money.

Ingenuity versus investment.

Not all brands will make it. But in a war of attrition there are no winners, least of all the customer, which is why it behoves us marketers - as Sun Tsu once so sagely said (nope, still not read him) - to "go smart or die trying."

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