32

Marketing Is War

Al Ries & Jack Trout

War belongs to the province of business competition, which is also a conflict of human interests and activities.
Karl von Clausewitz

THE BEST BOOK ON MARKETING was not written by a Harvard professor. Nor by an alumnus of General Motors, General Electric, or even Procter & Gamble.

We think the best book on marketing was written by a retired Prussian general, Karl von Clausewitz. Entitled *On War*, the 1832 book outlines the strategic principles behind all successful wars.

Clausewitz was the great philosopher of war. His ideas and concepts have lasted more than 150 years. Today, *On War* is widely quoted at places like West Point, Sandhurst, and St. Cyr.

War has changed dramatically since *On War* was first published. The tank, the airplane, the machine gun, and a host of new weapons have been introduced. Yet the ideas of Clausewitz are still as relevant today as they were in the nineteenth century.

Weapons may change, but warfare itself, as Clausewitz was first to recognize, is based on two immutable characteristics: strategy and tactics. His clear exposition of the strategic principles of war are likely to guide military commanders well into the twenty-first century.

Marketing Needs a New Philosophy

The classic definition of marketing leads one to believe that marketing has to do with satisfying consumer needs and wants.

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Marketing is "human activity directed at satisfying needs and wants through exchange processes," says Philip Kotler of Northwestern University.

Marketing is "the performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producer to consumer," says the American Marketing Association.

Marketing is "the performance of those activities which seek to accomplish an organization's objectives by anticipating customer or client needs and directing a flow of need-satisfying goods and services from producer to customer or client," says E. Jerome McCarthy of Michigan State University.

Perhaps the most complete explanation of the "needs and wants" theory is the definition provided by John A. Howard of Columbia University in 1973. Marketing, says Mr. Howard, is the process of: "(1) identifying customer needs, (2) conceptualizing those needs in terms of an organization's capacity to produce, (3) communicating that conceptualization to the appropriate laws of power in the organization, (4) conceptualizing the consequent output in terms of the customer needs earlier identified, and (5) communicating that conceptualization to the customer."

Are those the five steps on the road to marketing success today? Would identifying, conceptualizing, and communicating help American Motors compete successfully with General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler? Let alone Toyota, Datsun, Honda, and the rest of the imports?

Let's say American Motors develops a product strategy based on identifying customer needs. The result would be a line of products identical to those of General Motors, which spends millions of dollars researching the same marketplace to identify those same customer needs.

Is this what marketing is all about? The victory belongs to the side that does a better job of marketing research?

Clearly something is wrong. When American Motors ignores customer needs, the company is much more successful. The Jeep, a product borrowed from the military, is a winner. American Motors passenger cars are losers.

No focus group is likely to have conjured up the Jeep. Nor is identifying customer needs likely to help an also-ran compete with a leader.

Becoming Customer-Oriented

Marketing people traditionally have been customer-oriented. Over and over again they have warned management to be customer- rather than production-oriented.

Ever since World War II, King Customer has reigned supreme in the world of marketing.

But it's beginning to look like King Customer is dead. And like marketing people have been selling a corpse to top management.

Companies who have dutifully followed the directions of their marketing experts have seen millions of dollars disappear in valiant but disastrous customer-oriented efforts.

To see how we got into this predicament, you have to go back to the twenties when business was production-oriented. This was the heyday of Henry "You Can Have Any Color You Want As Long As It's Black" Ford.

In the production era, business discovered advertising. "Mass advertising creates mass demand which makes mass production possible," said the advertising experts.

In the aftermath of World War II, the leading companies became customer-oriented. The marketing expert was in charge and the prime minister was marketing research.

But today every company is customer-oriented. Knowing what the customer wants isn't too helpful if a dozen other companies are already serving the same customer's wants. American Motors's problem is not the customer. American Motors's problem is General Motors, Ford, Chrysler, and the imports.

Becoming Competitor-Oriented

To be successful today, a company must become competitor-oriented. It must look for weak points in the positions of its competitors and then launch marketing attacks against those weak points. Many recent marketing success stories illustrate this.

For example, while others were losing millions in the computer business, Digital Equipment Corporation was making millions by exploiting IBM's weakness in small computers.

Similarly, Savin established a successful beachhead in small, inexpensive copiers, a weak point in the Xerox lineup.

And Pepsi took advantage of its sweeter taste to challenge Coke in the hotly contested cola market. At the same time, Burger King was making progress against McDonald's with its "broiling, not frying" attack.

There are those who would say that a well-thought-out marketing plan always includes a section on the competition. Indeed it does. Usually toward the back of the plan in a section entitled "Competitive Evaluation." The major part of the plan usually spells out the marketplace, its various segments, and a myriad of customer research statistics carefully gleaned from endless focus groups, test panels and concept and market tests.

The Marketing Plan of the Future

In the marketing plan of the future, many more pages will be dedicated to the competition. This plan will carefully dissect each participant in the marketplace. It will develop a list of competitive weaknesses and strengths as well as a plan of action to either exploit or defend against them.

There might even come a day when this plan will contain a dossier on each of the competitors' key marketing people which will include their favorite tactics and style of operation (not unlike the documents the Germans kept on Allied commanders in World War II).

What does all this portend for marketing people of the future?

It means they have to be prepared to wage marketing warfare. More and more, successful marketing campaigns will have to be planned like military campaigns.

Strategic planning will become more and more important. Companies will have to learn how to *attack* and to *flank* their competition, how to *defend* their positions, and how and when to wage *guerrilla* warfare. They will need better intelligence on how to anticipate competitive moves.

On the personal level, successful marketing people will have to exhibit many of the same virtues that make a great military general—courage, loyalty, and perseverance.

Maybe Clausewitz Is Right

Maybe marketing is war, where the competition is the enemy and the objective is to win the battle.

Is this quibbling over details? Not really. Compare the game of football with the profession of marketing.

The football team that scores the most points wins the game. The marketing team that makes the most sales wins the marketing game. So far they're equivalent.

But try to play football the way you would play a marketing game.

Let's insert a marketing manager into a football game and watch him or her identify the goal line as the place to score points, that is, make sales. Then watch as the marketing manager lines up the team and heads straight for the goal line with the ball.

You don't have to be a sports expert to know that the direct approach in football leads to certain disaster.

In football, you win by outwitting, outflanking, outplaying the other team. The points on the scoreboard are only a reflection of your ability to do these things.

In war, you win by outwitting, outflanking, and overpowering the enemy. The territory you take is only a reflection of your ability to do these things.

Why should marketing be any different?

Why do the hundreds of definitions of the marketing concept almost never mention the word *competition?* Or suggest the essential nature of the conflict?

The true nature of marketing today involves the conflict between corporations, not the satisfying of human needs and wants.

If human needs and wants get satisfied in the process of business competition, then it is in the public interest to let the competition continue. But let us not forget the essential nature of what marketing is all about.

In Defense of Marketing Warfare

You might object to the direct application of military principles to marketing. War is horrible enough in wartime, people have told us, without extending it to peacetime.

And anyone who is opposed to the free enterprise system would probably also object to having the participants in the system practice the principles of marketing warfare. So be it.

Even people who defend the free enterprise system might think that marketing warfare is going too far. If you are one of those people, we would urge you to consider the results of the warfare analogy rather than the analogy itself.

A study of American business history of the past decade or so suggests that many of the appalling financial losses registered by companies like RCA, Xerox, Western Union, and others might have been avoided by the application of the principles of war. The study of warfare is not just a study of how to win. Equally as important is how not to lose.

The American economy has more to fear from unlimited and senseless corporate aggression than it has from the skilled competition of marketing gladiators in the art of war.

Free enterprise is marketing warfare. If you want to play in the free enterprise game, it seems to make sense to learn the principles first.

The Principle of Force

The greatest possible number of troops should be brought into action at the decisive point.

KARL VON CLAUSEWITZ

How many times have you heard company people say it's easier to get to the top than to stay there?

Forget it. That's a myth created by people who are more interested in the study of sociology than they are in recognizing the realities of business competition.

It's far easier to stay on top than to get there. The leader, the king of the hill, can take advantage of the principle of force.

No other principle of warfare is as fundamental as the principle of force. The law of the jungle. The big fish eat the small fish. The big company beats the small company.

The Mathematics of a Firefight

When you examine the mathematics of a firefight, it's easy to see why the big company usually wins. Let's say that the Red squad with nine soldiers meets a Blue squad with six. Red has a 50 percent numerical superiority over the Blue. 9 versus 6. Or it could be 90 versus 60 or 9000 versus 6000. It makes no difference what the numbers are, the principle is the same.

Let's also say that, on the average, one out of every three shots will inflict a casualty.

After the first volley, the situation will have changed drastically. Instead of a 9 to 6 advantage, Red would have a 7 to 3 advantage. From a 50 percent superiority in force to a more than 100 percent superiority.

The same deadly multiplication effect continues with the passage of time.

After the second volley, the score would be 6 to 1 in favor of Red.

After the third volley, Blue would be wiped out completely.

Notice how the casualties were divided between the two sides. The superior force (Red) suffered only half the casualties of the inferior force (Blue).

This result may be just the opposite of what you have been led to believe by all those Hollywood movies—the handful of marines decimating a company of Japanese before the marines are finally overrun.

In real life it's different. What happens when a Volkswagen Beetle hits a GMC bus in a head-on collision? You wind up with a few scratches on the bumper of the bus and a very thin German pancake. (The bigger you are, the harder they fall.)

The two vehicles have exchanged momentum. It's a basic law of physics. The larger, heavier vehicle sustains less damage than the smaller, lighter force.

There's no secret to why the Allies won World War II in Europe. Where the Germans had two soldiers, we had four. Where they had four, we had eight. The skill and experience of an enemy who had practically invented modern warfare and the leadership of men like Rommel and Von Rundstedt could not change the mathematics of the battleground.

In the military, the numbers are so important that most armies have an intelligence branch known as the order of battle. It informs commanders of the size, location, and nature of the opposing force. (The case of General William C. Westmoreland against CBS was based on whether order of battle documents in the Vietnam War were falsified or not.)

The Mathematics of a Marketing Melee

When two companies go head to head, the same principle applies. God smiles on the larger sales force.

Given a virgin territory, the company with the larger sales force is likely to wind up with the larger share of the market.

Once the market is divided up, the company with the larger share is likely to continue to take business away from the smaller company.

The bigger company can afford a bigger advertising budget, a bigger research department, more sales outlets, etc. No wonder the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Is there no future for the small competitor? Of course there is, which is one reason why this book was written. (General Motors, General Electric, and IBM don't need to study Clausewitz to be successful.)

But smaller companies with smaller market shares do need to think like field commanders. They must keep in mind the first principle of warfare, the principle of force, be it military or marketing. "The art of war with a numerically inferior army," said Napoleon, "consists in always having larger forces than the enemy at the point which is to be attacked or defended."

Custer could have become one of our nation's most famous heroes if he could have gotten the Sioux to attack over the hill one at a time.

Military generals know the importance of the principle of force. That's why they spend so much time studying the order of battle of an opposing force. For purposes of morale, however, a general tries to fire up his troops by telling them what good soldiers they are and what great equipment they have.

"Now we have the finest food, equipment, the best spirit and the best men in the world," said George C. Scott in his role as General George S. Patton, Jr. "You know, by god, I actually pity those poor bastards we're going up against."

Many marketing generals do the same thing and fall victim to their own rhetoric. In particular they talk themselves into the "better people" or the "better product" fallacies.

The "Better People" Fallacy

It's easy enough to convince your own staff that better people will prevail, even against the odds. It's what they want to hear. And surely in a marketing war quality is a factor as well as quantity.

It is, but superiority of force is such an overwhelming advantage that it overcomes most quality differences.

We have no doubt that the poorest team in the National Football League could consistently beat the best team in the NFL if it could field 12 men against the opposition's 11.

In business, where the teams are much larger, your ability to amass a quality difference is much more difficult.

The clear-thinking marketing manager won't confuse the pep talk at a sales rally with the reality of the marketing arena. A good general never makes military strategy based on having better personnel. Nor should a marketing general. ("Our army," said Wellington, "is composed of the scum of the earth, the mere scum of the earth.")

Obviously you'd be in deep trouble inside your company if you used Wellington's words to describe your own army. Tell your people how terrific they are, but don't plan on winning the battle with superior personnel.

Count on winning the battle with a superior strategy.

Yet many companies cling deeply to the better people strategy. They're convinced they can recruit and hire substantially better people than the competition can, and that their better training programs can help them keep their "people" edge.

Any student of statistics would laugh at this belief. Sure, it's possible to put together a small cadre of superior people. But the larger the company, the more likely the average employee will be average.

And when it comes to the megacompanies, the possibility of assembling an intellectually superior team becomes statistically almost zero.

At last count, IBM had 369,545 employees, a number which is growing rapidly. On a one-to-one basis, there may be more white shirts at IBM but not more gray matter.

IBM is winning the computer war the Eisenhower way. Where the competition has 2, IBM has 4. Where the competition has 4, IBM has 8.

The "Better Product" Fallacy

Another fallacy ingrained in the minds of most marketing managers is the belief that the better product will win the marketing battle.

Behind the thinking of many marketing managers is the thought that "truth will out."

In other words, if you have the "facts" on your side, it's only necessary to find a good advertising agency who can communicate those facts to the prospect and a good sales force who can close the sale.

We call this approach "inside-out thinking"—that somehow the advertising agency or the sales force can take the truth, as the company knows it, and use this truth to clear up the misconceptions that reside inside the mind of the prospect.

Don't be fooled. Misconceptions cannot easily be changed by an advertising or sales effort.

What is truth? Inside every human being is a little black box. When a human being is exposed to your advertising or sales claim, that person looks inside the box and says "That's right" or "That's wrong."

The single most wasteful thing you can do in marketing today is to try to change a human mind. Once a mind is made up, it's almost impossible to change.

What is truth? Truth is the perception that's inside the mind of the prospect. It may not be your truth, but it's the only truth you can work with. You have to accept that truth and then deal with it.

"If You're So Smart, How Come You're Not Rich?"

Even if you succeed in convincing the prospect that you have a better product, the prospect soon has second thoughts. "Hey, if your computer is better than IBM's, how come you're not the leader, like IBM is?"

Even if you get a few black boxes to go along with you, the owners of those black boxes soon let the unsold majority sway their judgment.

If you're so smart, how come you're not rich? That's a tough question to answer. In a marketing war you can't win just by being right.

There's the illusion, of course, that over the long run, the better product will win. But history, military and marketing, is written by the winners, not the losers.

Might is right. Winners always have the better product, and they're always available to say so.

The Superiority of the Defense

The defensive form of war is in itself stronger than the offense.

KARL VON CLAUSEWITZ

The second principle of Clausewitz is the superiority of the defense.

No military commander would seek out combat with the odds stacked against him. The rule of thumb is that an attacking force, to be successful, should have a superiority of at least 3 to 1 at the point of attack.

Yet how many marketing generals are all too willing to start an offensive war with totally insufficient force? Like Cardigan at Balaclava and Lee at Gettysburg, many marketing generals launch offensive attacks with advertising and marketing dollars that are insufficient by a factor of 2 to 1, 3 to 1, even 10 to 1. With the same predictable results.

The Mathematics of a Defensive Firefight

In an open field a firefight between two squads is rapidly decided in favor of the larger unit.

But what happens when one of the two squads is on defense? How does this change the mathematics of the situation?

Let's say a Red commander with a force of 9 soldiers meets a Blue commander with only 6 (a 50 percent superiority of force). But on this occasion the Blue force is on defense, say, in a trench or foxhole.

For a Blue soldier, the odds are still the same, 1 out of 3 shots, that he will hit one of the Red attackers.

What changes are the odds that a Red soldier will be able to hit one of the Blue forces, which now has the security of a defensive position? Instead of 1 out of 3, let's say the odds increase to 1 out of 9 shots.

(This corresponds to the difficulty of making "conquest" sales—that is, taking business away from an established competitor is usually much more difficult than getting business from a previously uncommitted prospect.)

After the first volley, the Red force still outnumbers the Blue, but by a margin of only 7 to 5. After the second volley, the margin is further reduced to 5 to 4. After the third volley the forces are the same, 4 to 4.

Red started the attack with a 50 percent superiority of force, but it's now even. At this point, the Red commander would presumably call off the attack since he no longer has superiority of numbers.

The Fruit of Victory

Throughout military history, defense has proved to be the stronger form of warfare. In the Korean War, America won in the South on defense and lost in the North on offense.

England lost in the Colonies on offense and won at Waterloo on defense.

Offense gets the glamour, but defense wins football games, as any NFL coach will hasten to tell you.

Why fight an offensive war at all if defense is so attractive? The paradox is the fruit of victory. If you can win a marketing battle and become the leading brand in a given category, you can enjoy that victory for a long time. Simply because you can now play defense, the stronger form of warfare.

A survey of 25 leading brands from the year 1923 proves this point. Sixty years later, 20 of those brands were still in first place. Four were in second place and one was in fifth place.

In six decades, only 5 out of 25 brands lost their leadership position. It's difficult to dethrone a king.

Ivory in soap, Campbell in soup, Coca-Cola in soft drinks. These represent strong marketing positions which can be taken only at great expense and with great skill and energy.

Don't Be a Hero

The biggest mistake marketing people make is failing to appreciate the strength of a defensive position.

The glamour of offensive war and the thrill of victory makes the average marketing manager eager to pick up a lance and go charging off at the nearest entrenched competitor.

Nothing in marketing is so pathetic as the charge of the light brigade. RCA and GE against IBM in computers. Exxon and Lanier against IBM in office automation. Western Union against everybody in electronic mail.

"Heroism" is a disease among too many marketing people eager to do or die for their company. If you approach the subject of marketing warfare looking for ways to cover yourself with marketing glory, you're reading the wrong book.

"Now I want you to remember that no bastard ever won a war by dying for his country," said George C. Scott in his Patton role. "He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country."

There are no heroes at IBM. No medals of honor awarded posthumously. Winners may be hard to admire, but as most losers will tell you, love is no consolation for having lost.

Friction Favors the Defense

One of the reasons the defensive form of warfare is so strong is the difficulty of launching a surprise attack.

"In theory," says Clausewitz, "surprise promises a great deal. In practice, it generally strikes fast by the friction of the whole machine."

In theory, the 1916 battle of the Somme was going to be a surprise attack. But after moving a million men into position and waiting a week for the artillery to do its job, the Allies were left with little surprise.

The larger the operation, the less the surprise. A small company might be able to surprise a big company with a new product. But Ford is unlikely to pull any fast ones on General Motors. The friction of the whole machine gets in the way.

When you look at case histories of leaders who were taken by surprise, you usually find they had ample warning. Leaders get overrun when they ignore those warnings or pooh-pooh the efforts of the competition.

In *Mein Kampf*, a book that sold some 10 million copies, Hitler told England and France exactly what he intended to do. A decade later he did it.

An Attack Takes Time

An attacker in a military campaign not only tends to sacrifice surprise but also wastes time in bringing the forces into action. Because of logistics problems, it can be days or weeks before the full force of an attack is felt by a defender —time that can be enormously useful to the defense.

On D day, only 156,115 troops were put ashore on the Normandy beaches in spite of a massive effort. Because of transportation and supply problems, it took several months to build up Allied strength to the millions of troops necessary to ensure success.

In a marketing attack, transportation is usually not a problem. A company can deliver products to thousands of outlets in days.

The bottleneck is communication. Getting a marketing message across to millions of customers can take months or years. There is often plenty of time for the defender to blunt the attacker's sales message by undercutting it in one form or another.

But to take advantage of time, the defender has to remain alert to potential threats from any direction.

The New Era of Competition

Some statesmen and generals try to avoid the decisive battle. History has destroyed this illusion.
KARL VON CLAUSEWITZ

The most bloodthirsty language in the newspapers today is not found in the international pages. It's found on the business pages.

"We'll murder them."

"It's kill or be killed."

"This is a life-or-death struggle."

No, these are not the words of a leftist guerrilla or a right-wing dictator. These are typical quotes from three business leaders discussing forthcoming marketing campaigns.

The language of marketing has been borrowed from the military. We *launch* a marketing *campaign*. Hopefully, a *breakthrough* campaign.

We *promote* people to higher *positions*. In *divisions, companies, units*. We *report gains* and *losses*. Sometimes we *issue uniforms*.

From time to time we go into the *field* to *inspect* those uniforms and *review* the progress of the *troops*. We have even been known to *pull rank*.

Up till now, it's only the language that has been borrowed from the military, not the strategic thinking behind the language.

Marketing warfare is an attempt to apply military thinking to marketing problems.

Marketing, as a scientific discipline, is less than 100 years old. Marketing is long on "seat of the pants" thinking and short on theory. Military theory can help bridge the gap.

The Headline Wars

If you've been reading *Business Week, Forbes*, or *Fortune*, you've probably had your fill of military language. The *beer war*, the *cola war*, and the *hamburger war* are recent examples of journalistic militarism.

But underneath the headlines, the writers totally ignore the most elementary military principles.

"New Xerox push in the office," said a recent headline in *The New York Times*. "Seeks lead in automation," said the subhead.

If Denmark invaded West Germany, a country 12 times its size, the press would express shock and incredulity.

Lead in automation? Xerox, a company with less than $2 billion in annual sales of office automation products, going up against IBM, a company with more than $40 billion?

There are many more examples of the semantic smoke without the strategic fire.

"National Semiconductor is crossing the Rubicon," said President Charles E. Sporck in the headline of an advertisement announcing the company's line of micro- and minicomputers.

When Julius Caesar crossed the real Rubicon in 49 B.C., he did so with a full legion of men (with two more in reserve). So awesome was Caesar's strength that his opponent, Pompey, promptly decided to evacuate Italy.

Where are Sporck's legions? Will IBM give up so quickly? You don't have to be a military genius to know that this semi-invasion won't be very successful.

Predictions or Propaganda?

When Coca-Cola announced its new, sweeter formula, it also confidently predicted a 1 percent gain in market share over each of the next 3 years. Was this a prediction or just propaganda? If it was meant to be propaganda, it missed the mark. No military commander in his right mind gives a timetable for victory.

"I shall return," said Douglas MacArthur when he left the Philippines in March 1942. If he had added "by the end of the year," his reputation would have been seriously dampened by the time he waded ashore in 1944. Unkept promises undermine morale. Marketing promises should be as vague as political ones. Otherwise, they will erode the effectiveness of your forces.

When Hitler promised to take Stalingrad and failed, he lost more than his military reputation. He also lost his "master of propaganda" image.

The Reality of Marketing Conflict

Rhetoric aside, it's clear that marketing is entering a new era, an era that will make the sixties and seventies look like a Sunday school picnic. Competition is getting brutal. The name of the game has become "taking business away from somebody else."

As companies experiment with different ways to increase sales, they are turning more and more to warfare strategies in general.

But aggressiveness alone is not the mark of a good military strategy. Especially aggressiveness as represented by the "more" school of management. More products, more sales people, more advertising, more hard work.

Especially more hard work. Somehow we feel better about success if we have to work hard to achieve it. So we schedule more meetings, more reports, more memos, more management reviews.

Yet military history teaches the reverse. A single-minded commitment to winning the battle on effort alone usually dissolves into defeat. From the trenches of World War I to the streets of Stalingrad in World War II, the military commander that lets his armies get bogged down in a hand-to-hand slugging match is usually defeated.

The dogged determination of Xerox to make it in the office automation market is not a sign of future success. It's a mark of futility.

Much better are quick, lightninglike strokes that depend more on timing than muscle. (What the Germans call *blitzkreig*.) Not that muscle, or the principle of force, is not important. Far from it. But unless an attack is properly planned, you throw away your advantage if you let the battle degenerate into a war of attrition.

Whenever you hear your commander say "We have to redouble our efforts," you know you're listening to a loser talk. The lights don't need to burn late in places like Armonk. IBM wins by thinking smarter, not longer.

The Nature of the Battleground

It is from the character of our adversary's position that we can draw conclusions as to his designs and will therefore act accordingly.

KARL VON CLAUSEWITZ

In a military battle the terrain is so important that a battle is invariably named after its geographic location.

The Plain of Marathon, the river Metaurus, the village of Waterloo, a town named Gettysburg, a hill named Bunker, a mountain called Cassino.

In a marketing battle, the terrain is important too. But the question is "Where." Where is the terrain? Where are marketing battles being fought?

A Mean and Ugly Place

In this book you'll read about the value of holding the marketing "high ground" and the need to avoid a "well-entrenched" competitor. Where is the high ground? Where are the trenches?

If you want to go out and do battle with your competitors, it's helpful to know where to go.

Marketing battles are not fought in the customer's office or in the supermarkets or the drugstores of America. Those are only distribution points for the merchandise whose brand selection is decided elsewhere.

Marketing battles are not fought in places like Dallas, Detroit, or Denver. At least not in the physical sense of a city or a region.

Marketing battles are fought in a mean and ugly place. A place that's dark and damp with much unexplored territory and deep pitfalls to trap the unwary.

Marketing battles are fought inside the mind. Inside your own mind and inside the mind of your prospects, every day of the week.

The mind is the battleground. A terrain that is tricky and difficult to understand.

The entire battleground is just 6 inches wide. This is where the marketing war takes place. You try to outmaneuver and outfight your competitors on a mental mountain about the size of a cantaloupe.

A marketing war is a totally intellectual war with a battleground that no one has ever seen. It can only be imagined in the mind, which makes marketing warfare one of the most difficult disciplines to learn.

Mapping the Mind

A good general carefully studies the terrain before the battle. Every hill, every mountain, every river is analyzed for its defensive or offensive possibilities.

A good general also studies the enemy's position. Hopefully, the exact location and strength of each unit is plotted on a map and studied before the battle begins. The best surprise is no surprise. What a commander hopes to avoid at all costs is a surprise attack from an unexpected direction.

In a marketing war, reconnaissance is extraordinarily difficult. How do you see inside a human mind to find out what the terrain looks like and what strong points the enemy holds?

One way to reconnoiter the human mind is to use marketing research. But not in the traditional way of asking customers what they want to buy. That's yesterday's approach.

What you're trying to find out is what positions are held by what companies. Who owns the high ground?

Done correctly, you can contour the mind of the average prospect to produce a map that is just as useful to a marketing general as the Michelin maps that Patton carried across Europe.

Mapping the mental battleground can give you an enormous advantage. Most of your competitors won't even know where the battle is being fought. They will be preoccupied with their own camp: their own products, their own sales force, their own plans.

Mountains in the Mind

Any attempt to describe a human mind in physical terms is bound to be symbolic. Yet there are certain symbols used in both military and marketing operations ,at seem to be especially appropriate.

In a military war, hills or mountains are usually considered strong positions, especially useful for defense. In a marketing war, management people often refer to strong positions as "high ground." So it seems appropriate to use the mountain as a key concept in marketing warfare.

But in warfare, a mountain can be either occupied or unoccupied. Tissue mountain, for example, is occupied by the brand Kleenex. Ketchup mountain is owned by Heinz. Computer mountain by IBM.

Some mountains are being strongly contested. Cola mountain is partially occupied by Coca-Cola, but is under heavy attack by Pepsi-Cola.

When a customer uses a brand name in place of a generic, you know the mountain in their mind is strongly held. When someone points to a box of Scott tissues and says, "Hand me a Kleenex," you know who owns the tissue mountain in that person's mind.

Segmentation Is Tearing Up the Terrain

Who owns the automobile mountain in the United States? Many years ago Ford did. But Ford got torn apart by the segmentation strategy of General Motors.

So today Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, and Buick each own different segments of the automotive mountain, with perhaps Cadillac in the strongest position as the owner of the high-priced luxury segment. (Today people will use the name Cadillac as a synonym for a high-quality product. "It's the Cadillac of television sets.") As a result of its five strong independent positions, General Motors owns the dominant share of the U.S. automotive market.

Monolithic mountains are being fought over and cut up into segments, each owned by a different warlord. This long-term trend is likely to continue well into the twenty-first century.

The original owner has a choice: extend or contract. Faced with an enemy that attempts to segment the market, a company can extend its forces to try to control the entire territory, or shrink them to protect home base.

The owner's instincts are usually wrong. Greed encourages a brand leader to extend its forces to try to control all segments. Too often everything is lost in an effort to protect a small portion of the mountain. As Frederick the Great once said, "He who attempts to defend everywhere defends nothing."