



MILITARY METAPHORS IN BUSINESS

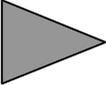
Cristina PRELIPCEANU

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the importance and relevance of business (or marketing in particular) and war association. When saying that business is war most people think of the marketing strategies that can show similarities with battles. We may also think about brand wars or aggressive comparative advertising.

We have examined both the opinions of those that are in favour of the metaphor “business is war” and of those that criticise the use of this syntagm. It is obvious that marketing strategies are somehow inspired by the works of military strategists, such as: N. Machiavelli, Sun Tzu or Carl von Clausewitz. All these are at the foundation of marketing strategies and tactics, some of whom being mentioned in the sections of this paper.

Keywords: war metaphors, marketing strategies, military strategies



Marketing strategies are not like war

“To manage a business successfully requires as much courage as that possessed by the soldier who goes to war. Business courage is much more natural because all the benefits which the public has in material wealth come from it.”

Charles F. Abbott, American industrialist (1876-1939)

A metaphor is a figure of speech based on the association of two elements which are essentially different: one used in a certain sphere of human life, whose meaning is then transferred through association to another sphere of human life. According to P.R. Wilkinson (1993: VIII), “a metaphor is a means of expressing a thing in terms of something else”. Saying “business is war” is different from saying “business is like war”. Hunt, a marketing professor at Texas Tech University in Lubbock (Texas), considers metaphors to be more than just words. They create a way of thinking, they show the way the person that uses them thinks about business.

Doc Searls states that “metaphors matter”. In fact, nothing matters more, because “metaphors are the magma from which our mountains of words extrude. Metaphors make meaning. They are what allow us to start sentences we do not know how we will finish, and to finish sentences we do not remember how we started. They are what allow us to forget the words another person speaks or writes yet to remember what they mean”.

When we are out of ideas or the old strategies just do not seem to work, we should create a list of metaphors comparing what it is we are looking at, whether it is a new product, a new market or the entire business, or something else. For instance, an entrepreneur who compares its marketing strategy to war will likely be thinking about such military maxims as “don’t divide your forces” or “choose your own ground for battles”.

Shelby Hunt considers that “the danger of metaphors is that you may bring in an entire system of values, behaviour, techniques and strategies that don’t really belong”. For him, the best example of this is the business as war metaphor. He describes an experiment in which people are given two options in a business scenario. In the first, the marketing strategy was to charge high prices and make high profits but you should not hurt competitors. In the second, the business must charge low prices and earn low profits but do lots of damage to competitors. The interesting result is that 35% preferred the low profits scenario, just because they wanted to hurt other competitors.

War is considered by many authors to be a terrible metaphor for business and for marketing actions. It locks a company in an adversative approach in which almost everyone becomes an enemy and it means spending time looking for ways to defeat your enemies, rather than making your own business great. It leads to zero-sum thinking, in which others have to lose, in order for you to win. For that reason Hunt prefers to compare business with **dance** or **football**.

A similar approach is followed by Doc Searls (2006). He considers companies to be either **competitive** or **combative** and this separation is made on the basis of the metaphor that governs their way of thinking. Competitive companies operate on the conceptual metaphor business is **sports** or marketing strategies are like **sports**. These metaphors lead to another: **markets are playing fields** or **arenas**. Combative companies conceive their marketing strategies in much more primitive terms. Their conceptual metaphors are **business is war** and **markets are battlefields**.

These metaphors conceive **competition** and **competitiveness** very differently but they use nearly identical vocabularies. By both metaphors, **companies attack, defend, flank, command, dominate, control, retrench**. Competitive companies express those terms strictly as metaphors whereas combative companies use them literally.

The difference in Searls opinion is that:

- In sports, fairness is all. In war, all is fair.
- Sports are full of rules. War has no rules.
- Playing fields are always level. Battlefields are rarely level.
- Sports is civilized. War is barbaric.
- Sports events end with victory or defeat but both sides live to play again. Wars end with triumph and domination or death and surrender.

The founder of Deep Woods Technology Inc., Carol Anne Ogdin, considers that those who use the metaphor “business is war” should not be in business. Only those who lack imagination may use image motivation like “kill the competition”. Instead, companies should think of providing more customer value than the competition. “For if that competitor is operating from the same nobility, you’ll improve, they’ll improve, and the customer will benefit the race to out-satisfy”. In her opinion, those who use the war metaphor are persons who lost their humanity and cannot see that the world is richer than war. She recommends more peaceful analogies like **gardens**, a **forest** or a **marathon**.

A similar approach is taken by Alexander Kjerulf (2006). He considers that “the healthy approach to business is not about waging wars. It is about creating value for your customers and promoting your vision. I believe that this way of doing business is simply an expression of love”. **Love** in this case means a commitment to other people’s happiness as well as your own. He sees this metaphor as the

realization that your happiness is tied to other people's happiness, a conviction that we can usually trust each other in business, that we work more effectively together than alone and that business goes better when we do something that makes a positive difference in the world.

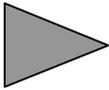
When love, and not war, is the driving force:

- work has meaning and relevance beyond the personal needs and desires.
- the focus is on creating and contributing, not on destroying.
- the attention is on your own organization, not on your enemy's.
- the focus is more on collaborating with customers, suppliers and even competitors to promote the company's vision.
- the focus is more on opportunities and less on threats.
- business is treated as a non-zero-sum game, in which many players create value together.

There are some explanations for this intensive use of the war metaphor. An explanation is that throughout the Industrial Age, both "business is war" and "markets are battlefields" were appropriate to be used. Most industries and markets were grounded in physical reality. Railroads, shipping, construction, automobiles and retail were all located in physical reality and even the phone system was easily understood in terms of phones, wires and switches. Every industrial market contained finite labour pools, capital, real estate, opportunities and natural resources. That is why business was really war, and markets were really battlefields.

According to Doc Searls "Growing markets are positive-sum creation, while wars are zero-sum at best. But **business is war** is a massive metaphorical machine that works so well that business war stories almost write themselves". This would not be a problem if marketing was the same now as it was twenty or fifty years ago. But promotional strategies are changing fast, especially where the Internet is involved. "The Web doesn't look, feel or behave like anything in the analogous world, even though we are eager to describe it as a **highway** or as a kind of **space**. The old war metaphor just isn't doing the job".

Consequently, the **business is war** metaphor or the comparison of the marketing strategies with battles seem to be less appreciated. Many authors criticise this association especially because the war words like **conflict**, **battle**, **destruction**, **fight** or **attack** are showing a way of thinking about business that can only be destructive. The war is considered to be one of the most inhumane images that one can make about business. According to D. Crăciun (2005: 175) "The military notion of defending the territory, for example, suggests an inappropriate conduct towards the consumers. When a business defends its territory, its market share, instead of taking care of the consumers' satisfaction, it is possible that it will lose what it obsessively tries to keep".



Marketing strategies are like war

“Formerly when great fortunes were only made in war, war was business: but now, when great fortunes are only made by business, business is war.”

Cristian Nostell Bovee, American businessman

Although there are many authors that criticise the use of war metaphors, there are still many others that think that business and war have a lot in common. Those that considers that this metaphor should be taken literally are in small numbers, but there are many that see the similarity between business and war strategies. Marketing strategy and capturing market share is somewhat similar in many respects to war strategy. Winslow (2005) considers that “if your enemy is trying to kill you sometimes the defence of such leads to unfortunate circumstances”. That means that **war** is not something that we should wish for, but it is something acceptable, and declaring war in business is sometimes necessary. He also makes some parallels of business and war that should be taken into consideration in debating this issue. He examines the relationship to war when thinking about marketing strategy, winning markets and market share and then defending what has been achieved. He finds next seven similarities between business and war:

- In war you have an opponent and your opponent wants what you have or you are trying to get what they have: market share.
- In war you fight many battles over the course of the war in many territories or markets.
- In war the intelligence of your opponent is very important and in marketing you need to estimate your competition’s next move.
- In war there are many aspects you need to control such as the air, ground and sea; in marketing you are also interested in controlling multiple market segments and servicing those customers better.
- In war you must be efficient with your supplies, such as: fuel, food, etc.; in marketing efficiency means higher profits.
- In war you must hold the territories that you capture. In marketing you must maintain market share once you have achieved it.
- In war you must defend your army and your country. In marketing you must defend your brand name and price points, by using many different methods.

Other opinions, like Mark Fuller’s (1993), are more focused on the benefits of teamwork, which is one of the most important principles in war. He considers this to be extremely relevant in business, stating that “the essence of learning is doing; the essence of doing is teamwork”. In his opinion, both war and business are about the same thing: succeeding in competition. In order to do so organisations should always consider the following dimensions:

- To generate better information than your rivals do.
- To analyze that information and make sound choices.

- To make those choices quickly.
- To convert strategic choices into decisive action-

It becomes clear that marketing and war do have some elements in common. There are some war strategies that can be applied in marketing, but, of course, we should interpret them in order to be useful. In the opinion of Radnika Chadha (2002) “Competitive simulation and war games will help managers rehearse their strategic and tactical responses to competition”. We should let our mind open to any possibility of learning new things. This might be a way to develop our skills.

The comparison of marketing with **sports**, like chess for example, is seen as something that could have been true some decades ago, but it is no longer relevant. Although both marketing and chess involve anticipation and countermoves of complicated tactics, chess is considered to be far simpler because you only have two opposing forces, a given army of tools and limited rules of manoeuvre. In Chadha’s opinion “marketing is now a far more complicated game, closer to a war than ever before. There are multiple players, no rules of engagement, and a fight to the finish”.

Is that not in total contradiction to Alexander Kjerulf or Carol Anne Ogden? What we can do is to have a look at how many times the **war metaphor** is used in reality. A simple google of “business as war” on the Internet can give an idea of its usage. The results are impressive. More than 300 million sites were found, most of them having a title similar to “company X in war with company Y”. People perceive business as war, and that is a fact. This statement is supported by the results of an investigation on the metaphorical language in the summary and business description section of Initial Public Offerings prospectuses of both Internet and non-Internet companies. The two primarily pragmatic metaphors were “business is war” and “information is a solid/liquid”.

More arguments to have a look at the military strategies before getting into business, and especially in marketing, are given by Michael Smock (2005). He considers that “the reality is that most of the theories that drive marketing campaigns have their roots in military strategy and specifically an area of thought called manoeuvre theory. Attempting to hide or disguise this would be less than genuine and dilute the power of the theories and contributions”. The manoeuvre theory consists in the ability to shape the competitive landscape to your advantage and the disadvantage of your adversaries and its best practice results in winning without fighting. Smock (2005) gives some examples of similarities between military and business campaigning:

- a. Activity. Business and war are each a form of competition involving two or more adversaries striving to gain an advantage or achieve a victory.
- b. Strategy. Strategy plays an important role in each activity and can determine the outcome of the conflict.

c. Resources. Both business and war face significant logistic issues that require the organization and projection of people and resources.

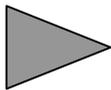
d. Competencies. Both the military and business should marshal and command a complex set of resources and competencies.

e. Leadership. Visionary leaders capable of driving sustainable results are critical to the success of each activity and can be a decisive factor in determining the success of the campaign.

f. Intelligence. The ability to collect, analyze and distribute competitive intelligence is paramount to both the military and business.

Gerrald A. Michaelson and Steven W. Michaelson (2005) also propose 12 marketing principles which may set the foundation of a strategy to win clients, principles based on Sun Tzu's philosophy. Applying those principles does not guarantee the victory, but ignoring them means losing the war. A rule may sometimes be ignored, but it should never be neglected. The application of all these principles is made keeping in mind a true art, the strategy. The same respect for Sun Tzu and his strategies is shared by Dan Lundell. He realised that "markets are always in war. No matter which market you choose, it is in a permanent conflict. 24 hours a day and 7 days a week news are spreading, information is travelling, opinions are made. Then, on the base of those opinions actions are being taken and the conflict continues. Whether it is about dividend world markets or any other, one thing is certain: there are winners and losers."

After having examined the ideas of the authors who consider marketing to be like war, or at least that businessmen can learn from war strategies, we may have a more comprehensive idea of why this metaphor is used so often. This section presented several ideas that go from stating that war and marketing strategies are very much alike to the fact that many war strategies can be applied to some extent to business or marketing. All these ideas have in common the fact that they do not separate war and business and that they cannot deny that these two terms have a stronger or lighter connection.



Conclusions

Business is war but that doesn't mean it can't be fought with honor".

Dan Lock, marketing expert

Business is still seen as war by many authors and practitioners, and especially by the press, where everything should be extraordinary, and what can make something more sensational than a comparison with war? There are two main metaphors, totally different, when it comes to business. It can be seen as war or as peace or something peaceful. The traditional language of business certainly makes business sound like a version of war: **outsmarting the competition, capturing market**

share, making a killing, fighting brands, beating up suppliers, locking up customers, etc. But the way people started to talk about business at present seems to be different. You have to listen to customers, work with suppliers, create teams, establish strategic partnership – even with competitors. Business is cooperation when it comes to creating a pie and competition when it comes to dividing it up. In other words, business is war and peace.

Although there are authors that see many similarities between business and war and it is obvious that managers and marketers do have many things to learn by reading military strategies, they should be careful not to change their entire set of values. Using the war metaphors may change or influence a person's way of looking at and dealing with business issues. In business no one is killed and no one should be. The main objective is to increase the profit and the main tool for this is to increase the customer satisfaction. Of course, strategies should be made before taking an action and the competition should be one of the main elements to be analysed. But that should not transform all business thinking into war statements. Business theories have been improved by the use of concepts from many other fields. Still, business should remain business.

References and bibliography

- Chadha, R.** *Business as war*.
- Crăciun, D.** 2005. *Etica în afaceri*. Bucureșt: ASE Pbl. House.
- Fuller, M. B.** 1993. *Business as war*. Cambridge: Fast Company, MA.
- Grievies, M. W.** *Business is War: An Investigation into Metaphor Use in Internet and Non-Internet IPOs*.
- Hollinger, A.** 2005. *A Lexical Approach to Financial and Business English*, Bucharest: Universitară Pbl. House.
- Korten, D. C.** 1998. *Corporațiile conduc lumea*. București: Antet Pbl. House.
- Machiavelli, N.** 1995. *Principele*. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House.
- Smock, M.** *Military metaphors: is business war?*
- Trout, J.** 2005. *Trout on strategy, capturing minshare, conquering markets*. Bucharest: Brandbuilders.
- Wilkinson, P.R.** 1993. *Traditional English Metaphors*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Winslow, L.** *Top 7 Similarities of Business and War*.

<http://eninearticle.com/?Top-7-Similarities-of-Business-and-War&id=265490>
<http://www.weatherhead.case.edu/edm/archive/detalils.cfm?id=9238&topic=23>
http://www.twoscenarios.typepad.com/maneuver_marketing_commun/2005/05/militarymetaph.html
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0DTI/is_n1_v25/ai_19128554
[http://doc.weblogs.com/stories/storyReader\\$196](http://doc.weblogs.com/stories/storyReader$196)
<http://www.deepwoods.com/passion/contrary/PoorWar.htm>
<http://www.positivesharing.com/2006/12/make-love-not-war-in-business/>
<http://www.ceoforum.com.au/article-detail.cfm?cid=6169>
<http://www.businessmagazin.ro/articole/In-afaceri-ca-la-război-5133.htm>
http://www.abm.ro/articol.php?id_articol=227
<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/catalyst/2002/06/20/stories/2002062000190400.thm>

The author

Dr. Cristina Prelipceanu is a Reader in the Department of Germanic Languages and Business Communication of the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. She holds a PhD in *the economic and commercial language in Romanian and English* and has published a monograph and many studies on the topic, as well as several academic course books. Her main scientific pursuits are connected with issues in applied linguistics and foreign language teaching, reflected in various contributions to scientific journals and papers presented at several national and international conferences and symposia.