



Warfare Strategy in the Battle for the Mind.¹

By Max Sutherland

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Military analogies are common in marketing. We *launch* campaigns, we *target* audiences and do *battle* for the mind. Here is another one. This one emerged from continuous tracking of many hundreds of commercials, week by week, over more than a decade.² This military analogy made sense of a lot of ad tracking data and proved valuable in thinking about advertising generally.

It is this:

In marketing as in the military, there are attack forces and there are occupation forces. They play different roles with different strengths and weaknesses.

Today I want to share with you why I believe it is valuable in advertising to think in terms of deploying the attack forces to capture the mental territory and then the occupation forces to hold that mental territory.

In the mass of continuous tracking data we collected, we hoped to see some consistencies start to emerge - and they did. These are documented in my book, 'Advertising and the Mind of the Consumer: What works, what doesn't and why'.³ (www.AdandMind.com).

There were also a number of anomalies in the tracking histories. As we struggled to make sense of some of these, I thought about how the military utilize different troops in different roles; attack forces capture the territory and occupation forces hold on to it. Understanding emerged and the smoke obscuring the reasons for a number of ad failures began to dissipate.

Value of the Analogy

This analogy of using the attack forces first and then the occupation forces, turned out to have many implications.

1. Once the mental territory has been captured, it then takes much less media weight to defend it.
2. It made sense of why it is good strategy to use longer length commercials first (as the attack forces). Then move to shorter lengths (the occupation forces) *after* the mental territory has been captured.
3. Likewise, the analogy helped us understand why radio, billboards, print ads and now web banner ads, could sometimes seem totally ineffective and yet at other times be wonderfully effective. The pattern in the data left us no doubt that these media make very effective *occupation* forces for re-triggering and reinforcing memories implanted by the much more expensive attack forces (such as TV). But unfortunately they are nowhere near as effective in the short term role of *capturing* the mental territory.
4. Different troops for different missions. For any new ad campaign, what is the mission? Is it to capture completely new mental territory? Or is it to relieve/freshen up the existing occupation forces? You have to allow time for completely new campaigns to 'wear-in'.

5. Make use of ad sequels as occupation forces. Our minds process the familiar more quickly so sequels don't have to 'wear-in'. They minimize media spend. They build on the mental territory already held. Remember, it is harder to get into peoples' heads in the first place than it is to stay there.

6. Occupation forces need a consistent and uniform presence. This means a consistent (though not necessarily heavy weight) ad presence and importantly it means a consistent ad style. To re-trigger what is already in peoples' head, requires less in the way of resources and firepower – the source of the advantage. Ad 'ad equity' exists in past advertising. It consists of any unique characteristic features and icon(s) – associations in peoples' minds that are now 'owned' by your brand, as a result of its past advertising. Marlboro, Absolut and Omega are three examples - three brands that have remained true to themselves and their advertising heritage over many years.

7. Ad campaigns for new brands fail if they don't increase sales. With large brands, however, this is not, necessarily the case. The larger a brand's share, the larger the role its advertising has as an occupation force - to reinforce and maintain its existing share. Campaigns for well-established brands are not necessarily failures if they hold on to, and reinforce their already captured territory.

Why Holding Mental Territory is Important.

As we have seen, getting into peoples' minds is a very different thing to staying there. It is harder to get into peoples' heads in the first place. It takes more resources and more firepower. To re-trigger what is already there, requires much less. This is a key reason why big brands have an advantage. It costs less to defend and hold territory than to capture it.

Ehrenberg and his colleagues have produced volumes of data over many years showing that market leaders and big brands have inherent advantages because of size.⁴ Other, panel based research has indicated that for well established brands with established ad campaigns, single reinforcement/reminder exposures can have substantial effects on short term sales and market share.⁵ So there is a lot of evidence that big brands have an advantage because of their size.

On the other hand, various other researchers (see e.g. Baldinger et al 2002⁶) have produced data that seem to challenge this. Market share does not make a brand invulnerable as is evidenced by Golder's analysis of market leaders in 100 product categories in 1923 in the USA.⁷ Golder revealed that only 23% of the brand leaders in 1923 were still brand leaders 74 years later. Another 25% were still in the top five but this means that more than half (52%) had completely lost their purported size advantage.

Leading brands have to actively defend and hold their captured mental territory – to hang onto the mental salience that they have already achieved. Brands that neglect their occupation forces, that fail to hold on to the captured mental territory and fail to capitalize on it, lose salience.

Tracking convinced us that the 'supportive cognitions' underpinning repeat buying, help 'lock in' the brand's market share advantage and decline if neglected. The number of consumers who hold a positive "belief" about a brand is closely related to the number of people who buy or use the brand and its brand salience. It is tempting to discount these as 'halo effects' because to an extent they are. But more than a decade of continuous tracking leads us to believe in their role, not in persuasion so much as 'supportive cognitions' that provide the consumer with a 'rationale' to underpin their continued buying of the brand.

In other words, whether or not these supportive cognitions are causal in getting people to buy the brand in the first place, they can provide consumers with a rationale to justify to themselves why they continue to buy a brand more regularly than other brands.

Stopping advertising is the equivalent of withdrawing the occupation forces and we had rare but invaluable opportunities to see what happens when the occupation forces are withdrawn. Naturally, the brand quickly loses advertising presence as measured by its advertising awareness. But don't be surprised if, for up to several months, the brand salience and supportive cognitions as well as the brand's market share are relatively unaffected. Eventually however, the supportive cognitions underpinning the brand begin to drop away and when that happens, the rate of decline can be sickeningly rapid. This leaves the brand exposed and potentially more vulnerable to competitors making attacks on its market share.

Case Example: An fmcg product, very strong (around 70%) market share. It stopped advertising, for budget reasons, and remained off air for 3 months. Market share and the numbers of buyers of the brand remained unchanged over the first two months. Supportive cognitions did not decline during that time. One supportive cognition was that a majority of the brand's buyers believed and continued to 'believe' that *there are real differences between brands* in the product category. After holding up for 2 months, this (and other supportive cognitions) began to deteriorate rapidly and by the end of the third month, even though buyers were still buying the brand as before, many more of them no longer professed that there were any real differences between brands. Implicitly this acknowledged their repeat buying was anchored in habit rather than any commitment. Habit itself is never easy to break but it is harder to change when it is underpinned by 'supportive cognitions'.

When the brand is left exposed and vulnerable like this, does it inevitably lead to market share decline? No. Much depends on how long it pertains and what the competitors do. Any sensible company, faced with tracking evidence of looming vulnerability as alarming as this, is clearly not going sit back, do nothing and watch what happens. Despite its budget problems, this brand went back on air immediately the deterioration became evident. It was very fortunate in that its major competitors advertise periodically rather than continuously and they happened to be also off-air during the very same period. So the supportive cognitions were able to be recovered by resuming advertising. Else, we expect this situation would have led to market share losses after which it would have been a much more formidable task for the brand to win back those supportive cognitions.

Conclusion

This simple but powerful analogy aids in the planning, design and execution of advertising. Above all, it helps avoid oversimplification in that it compels us to consider the same ad tactics may be strong in one role but a failure in others.

To deploy advertising with maximum efficiency....think in terms of using attack forces to capture the mental territory and then the occupation forces to hold that territory.

Notes & References

¹ This talk was presented at European Advertising Symposium, June 2002 and is based on a paper that I published in Admap: "Ad Strategies for Brand Warfare". Admap, Jan. 2001, pp.14--16.

² Using the MarketMind tracking system now owned by NFO.

³ Sutherland, Max and Alice Sylvester, 'Advertising and the Mind of the Consumer: What works, what doesn't and why', 2nd edition, Allen & Unwin, 2000. Available in 8 languages including Dutch and Polish – see www.AdandMind.com

⁴ Ehrenberg, A.S.C. *Repeat Buying*. London: Charles Griffin Company, 1988

Ehrenberg, A.S.C., Gerald Goodhardt, and Patrick Barwise, "Double Jeopardy Revisited" *Journal of Marketing* 54, 3 (1990)

⁵ See the work of John Philip Jones, *When Ads Work: New Proof that Advertising Triggers Sales*, Lexington NY 1995 and Colin McDonald, From "Frequency" to "Continuity" - Is It a New Dawn?, *Journal of Advertising Research*, July/August 1997 pp21-25

⁶ Baldinger, Allan L., Edward Blair & Raj Echambadi, "Why brands grow", *Journal of Advertising Research*, Jan/Feb 2002 pp7-14

⁷ Golder, Peter *Journal of Marketing Research*, May 2000