



Business as War

In our frenzied quest to win over consumers we are often overwhelmed by what we see as the need to battle for customer attention in a competitive environment dominated by huge companies with unfair advantages. This perception that we are engaged in a war is reinforced by books being published on a somewhat regular basis that relates business to everything from Von Clausewitz to the United States Marine Corps. Certainly business is a competitive encounter, and the competition can sure get intense. But it is not a war.

A war is won by overpowering the other side through “shock and awe”. Were this true in the business arena small businesses would not stand a chance against the giants. Yet more than 97% of American businesses are small and medium enterprises, so for all their power and presence, the giants aren’t pounding SME’s into submission quite as quickly as the war analogy might lead one to suspect.

Rather than being compared to a war, it is more productive for us to compare business to a baseball game. In a baseball game the playing field can be evened by factors that don’t readily appear on paper or in the analyst booth. Teams that should be dominating the league don’t always win, and certainly no team wins every day. What is happening on the days when the better team loses? The “smaller” team outmaneuvers them and executes the fundamentals better. They out hustle the other bigger team, use their speed, play as a team, and, perhaps most importantly, muster the enthusiasm and momentum that overwhelms the big boys.

On the business field, as on the playing field, the SME strength is in our size and our ability to move faster, change course easier and garner the team spirit and drive needed to outrun the giants. We are closer to the fans (our customers) because we are small enough to establish real relationships and get feedback from them with regard to what they want and how they want it. We are not formula providers. To use a military metaphor, we don’t march, like the Redcoats, in some pre-described formation. We sit in the trees, like the minutemen, and snipe away at the rigid formation guerilla style.

Perhaps even more problematic with the Business as War analogy is the absence of civility. War is hell, business is not. The rules of war, while somewhat of an oxymoron, are there to try to maintain some level of humanity while the killing rages on. The idea that business is “take no prisoners” and “kill, kill, kill” extracts all humanity from business and negates the idea of win-win. Sure there is competition, and sure the idea is win, but it is not, and should not be, to destroy. Once we begin thinking that way, we’ll find out capacities to create will have been diminished.