

Opinion

HOW THE ARMY TAUGHT ME TO BE A BETTER MARKETER—5 KEY LESSONS

Understanding, motivating and turning people into believers is the heart of both professions

By Patrick Lafferty, Published on August 28, 2023.



Credit: Pete Muller/Getty Images

People often ask how my seven years as a platoon leader and company commander in the U.S. Army prepared me for a career in marketing. Believe it or not, the two aren't as different as you might think.

So much of the work in the Army is about learning to understand human nature and what motivates people. In the Army as in corporate America, one often must encourage people to do things they may not want to do or make decisions they'd rather avoid. Understanding what makes people tick and how to motivate them, turning them into believers and buyers, is the heart of marketing—so the Army experience was formative.

Following lessons learned in the Army, here are 5 tips:

Understand what a brand represents

Struggling to meet recruitment quotas last year, the Army used market research to learn what people know—or think they know—about the Army. As a result, its latest [campaign](#) highlights combat and non-combat opportunities, including careers in science and technology. Similarly, brands need to conduct foundational research to understand what they represent and to inform what they want to be.

By conducting an open-ended segmentation study, brands can determine what makes them unique. For reliable results, start with a blank slate and no preconceived notions. So often, it's the counter-intuitive information that is most helpful, because it helps eliminate the bias of your priors and focuses you on what the data say. Think of how Barbie and Lego, two established brands in need of reinvention, understood they needed to make bold moves to expand beyond their initial target audience.

Recognize different levels of consumer buy-in

Buying a candy bar requires less buy-in than purchasing a car or committing years of your life to military service. Brands need to understand that a consumer's initial motivation might evolve over time.

I initially joined the Army to cover my college tuition. But less than a year in, I was 100% committed and tuition reimbursement was no longer the primary motivator. Similarly, consumers may initially be interested in a brand for one reason and then shift over time as the brand and their relationship with it evolves.

Constantly innovate and adapt

Soldiers are taught that adaptability is essential to survival. We were constantly mastering new skills and adapting new strategies and techniques. As comfortable as brands may be with the status quo, they need to embrace a cycle of ongoing change and constantly foster innovation.

Think of how the Sears catalog was basically the first Amazon, a place where you could order a refrigerator, underwear, a fly swatter or anything else. It stuck with what it did and never evolved. Though human nature can encourage us to stick with what's working, businesses and brands require evolution to succeed.

Listen to consumers

The most careful listeners you'll ever meet are Army recruiters; how else do you get people to sign? Brands need to find the compelling intersection of who the brand is and what people want. In that way, they can keep what makes the brand great, but change in ways that are consistent with the brand's truth.

A brand's story is what makes it unique and different. Use analytics to identify your unique selling proposition, which is the one thing that sets you apart from competitors. Using quantitative and qualitative tools, brands can discover their strengths and weaknesses, and determine how to leverage them to highlight that advantage.

Make your customers evangelists

When brands motivate consumers to become evangelists, they become the best communicators. A Nielsen [study](#) found that 92% of consumers believe friends and family over any kind of advertising. In the military, and with so many products and experiences, passionate word-of-mouth is the greatest way to create believers and buyers. Once I had total buy-in into the military, I excitedly told friends and family about my experience.

As a soldier, I learned the necessity of change and adaptability. Granted, brands aren't literally fighting battles, but they are contending for the hearts and minds of passionate consumers.



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