

THE ART OF WAR AND SALES

Sun Tzu's *Art of War* is a perennial favorite of military leaders, business executives, and even athletic coaches that thrive on the metaphor that competition is war. I have read this book several times, generally through the eyes of the people I work with—salespeople. Many of the principles in this classic have relevance for sales: preparation is vital to your success, fight battles on the ground of your choosing, and attack where you are strong and your opponent is weak. From this perspective, it is a good read for salespeople.

The challenge when reading this book as a salesperson is not necessarily the principles of warfighting; it is the selection of the enemy. This has always confounded me. The customer is surely not the enemy. The customer is the prize for winning the battle. Competitive businesses are the obvious choice because most business people consider industry competitors as the enemy. It is great rhetoric to electrify an audience at a company meeting: "Let's go out there and crush the competition!" Everyone cheers in their best Braveheart scream and battle face. Strategically, this may have some relevance, but salespeople live in the tactical world.

For me, the best way to advance this war metaphor is to frame the enemy as the problem that the customer is trying to fix or the need that he or she is trying to satisfy. This has an inherent advantage. If your enemy is the customer's problem, you can enlist the customer as an ally in fighting this battle. You do not enjoy this same dynamic if you frame the enemy as your direct competitor. Customers have no interest in defeating your opponent—they only care about defeating their opponent. So, by framing the enemy as your customer's problem, you can partner with the customer and bring a synergy that results in a sale, if you solve the problem.

You cannot ignore your direct competitors for a piece of business, though. This is tantamount to ignoring the terrain, the weather, or other elements of war. An awareness of the competitor's strategy helps you differentiate your offer.

The Art of War is good reading for salespeople. It requires some patience and reflection as you absorb the principles. It will help you think strategically and sell victoriously.

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